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Interview no. 1575

Sally Gutierrez McQuinn

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Sally Gutierrez McQuinn

Interviewer: Steve Velasquez

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Salinas, California

Date of Interview: July 28, 2005

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Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Sally Gutierrez McQuinn was born in Mexico, and her parents came to the United States in 1920, when she was only a few months old; she was raised in Gilroy, California; in 1941, she was married; shortly thereafter, she began working as a bookkeeper, which put her in frequent contact with braceros; she later became the first certified interpreter in Salinas, California, which also allowed her to interact with braceros on a regular basis. Ms. Gutierrez briefly describes her childhood and family; in the early 1940s she was hired as a bookkeeper for an operational office in Gilroy, California; she was in charge of payroll for the braceros, and she saw firsthand that 10 percent was discounted from their salary; it was her understanding that there was an agreement between the United States and Mexico that the money would be mailed to Mexico so that the braceros would have it available to them when they returned; bracero complaints went through her, because she was the only one in the office; she recalls one instance when a grower fed the braceros eggs, ham, biscuits, and jam, but they would not eat it, because they thought the ham was spoiled and the jam was nothing but orange peels; all they needed was someone to explain to them; in 1945, she became the first certified interpreter in Salinas, California, and worked primarily with cases involving the bracero program; she briefly talks about a tragic train accident, where she spoke with police and the men who survived; consequently, it launched a congressional investigation and was one of the biggest cases she handled; moreover, she also discusses a situation involving Southern Pacific, an incident where there was a fire on a bus, and yet another case that involved banning the use of the short hoe; in her opinion, braceros were never really appreciated, even when they were need, and once the war was over, they were treated even worse.

B Ua YcZ=bfj JYk YY. Sally Gutierrez-McQuinn

8UYcZ=bfj JYk . July 28, 2005

B Ua YcZ Interviewer: Steve Velasquez

Today is July 28, 2005 we are in Salinas National Steinbeck Center for the Bracero Oral History Project. My name is Steve Velasquez, National Museum of American History and we are here with Sally Gutierrez-McQuinn.

SV: Mrs. Gutierrez can you tell me when and where you were born.

SG: I was born in Mexico and my parents immigrated to the United States in 1920. I was just about five or six months old. I didn't really, of course I don't remember anything from Mexico but later on I had traveled there almost every year. I have been all over. I like to travel (she giggles).

SV: Can you tell me about how many brothers and sisters do you have and what your parents did.

SG: I have, right now, there were six of us, four girls and two boys, only one of my sisters passed away. The rest of us are still here but one brother is an attorney and he lives in New York City. Another one is principal the school in Gilroy and he still lives in Gilroy. That's where I was raised and went to school. All of us got married and had children. We have brilliant children. I have seven and I have three great grand children.

SV: Can you tell me a little bit, about how you ended up in Salinas, California?

SG: Well, I went to school in Gilroy and I lived in South Carnival at 303. It's there past. (unintelligible). And so three years later I married him on December of 1941. We have three children two boys and a girl.

SV: Can you tell me a little bit about how you became involved with the bracero workers?

SG: Oh, yes, when my husband was in the service I went back to Gilroy to stay with my parents until he got back.

SG: During that time there, I looked for a job. I was working at Montgomery ward, the store, and someone came over and they were looking for bilingual and to do office work. So I was hired first by a friend to do office work maybe like a month we stayed that brought the braceros over to manage the program. So I was in charge of Gilroy operational office. I took on all kinds of responsibilities there at the office. And I did all right. As soon as my husband got back, I came back to Salinas and we started new here in Salinas. Over here in Salinas, I got involved. I had a lot of jobs before and then I became a translator. So as an interpreter I kept interpreting for a lot of cases concerning the Bracero Program. First of all, when ever they were sick they had to go see a doctor. Then also, accidents that happen and also troubles they would get into. So was into a lot of cases and I was in Abilene county working for a municipal court and that's where I started as an interpreter after that happened. I became a certified interpreter and did all the translations. And also when Cesar Chavez was here there was a hearing after the congressional investigation on regards to the train accidents. I was interpreter in that case. I was hired by Washington D.C. to do that. I did all that, back and forth on both sides .

SV: Let's talk a little bit about the Braceros, when you worked for the food office. What were some of the cases that you worked on or what for to help them out?

SG: As I said I was hired mostly as a bookkeeper but I was the only one in the office naturally any problems that they had they would come and tell me about it. For instance, the first group that arrived in Gilroy they went to work for a grower there and about the middle of morning they came back to the office and I asked them, "Why aren't you working?" They said, "Oh, we're hungry, you should see what kind of breakfast they gave us. We couldn't eat it."

SG: And so I called the grower and he explained to me what he did. He wanted to have a special breakfast for them. So he made ham and eggs and biscuits with marmalade. And these braceros probably came from a very small village of places and at that time they didn't travel back and forth like the way it is now. So they were not familiar with a lot of the American food and they thought the ham was spoiled meat. And then the jam were only orange peelings and so they didn't, and the grower came in too, he was disappointed. He went out of his way and look, they left all the food there. So I had to explain to them that it was very good food and so they went back. All they needed was somebody that could speak Spanish to them and Gilroy being a small town there weren't too many people that could do that and office work and also talk to them. So I did. I helped both the growers and the braceros. And may other little things that use to happed. For instance they just had a little cold and or a sneezing and they wanted to go to the doctor right away. And sometimes they were disappointed because the doctor told them "oh, go home and just take an aspirin." (She laughs). The wanted a shot or they wanted something more. So little things like that, that I could say that they both had problems.

SV: That's interesting your breakfast story. Tell me a little bit, if you can explain a little bit more about the grower or bad incident. Early on the growers welcomed the braceros. About how long did that last?

SG: The good welcome?

SV: Yeah, the good welcome.

SG: No, not to long. That is true. Another thing I remember to also, they, like I said I prepared the payroll and wrote up the checks and that grower would come in and sign them and then I distribute the checks. They come to the office. They use to come in. Gilroy was a small town at that time.

SG: And so if there was one of them that knew how to read and was very smart. So he came and asked me in Spanish, "What is this ten percent, diez por ciento que nos redujeron y que es?" He wanted to know what the ten percent was. So I explained that the two counties had made that agreement. That they were supposed to hold ten percent, which availed that money to the Wells Fargo oh, I forget the address, anyway. It was a branch of the Wells Fargo and that Wells Fargo would mail it to Mexico. So when they returned they would get their money. And he told me definitely. He said we'll never see it again. And it came true. (She laughs). And I still remember that. And I was witness that the ten percent wasn't mailed to Wells Fargo. After that, of course, I had no idea where it went or what happened to it but the money was mailed a ghost and that ten percent through the Wells Fargo banking. I forget whether it was Berkley or close to San Francisco. I can't remember where.

SV: Out of curiosity, where are the books from that period right now? Do you know if they still exist?

SG: All those papers, well, as I mentioned before, as soon as my husband came back from over seas I came to Salinas and so somebody else took my place and in fact to replace me they had to have two people. And they had a person that, the son, they were of German decent but they came from Sinaloa. They spoke Spanish very well and so (unintelligible). She took care of the office and then also the father was deputized. And so he would keep peace with them and explain and try to solve their problems or everything. So the two of them took my place.

SV: How long were you working for the food office? About how many years?

SG: In Gilroy, I only worked about a year and a half, a little less than two years. But when I came to Salinas I started in different jobs and then I ended up as an interpreter again I got involved.

SV: Do you remember about what year?

SG: Well, it was in 1943 or 1944 and then I came back to Salinas. No, it was in 1945. When the war was over, now I almost forget. And when I was working in Gilroy it must have been 1942, 1943.

SV: At the beginning of the war?

SG: At the beginning of the Bracero Program. And over here I worked in different jobs for a while. Then I decided to be an interpreter. I gave up because I worked in a doctor's office and I worked in an insurance office for the city of Salinas. And then that's when I got the idea that an interpreter was needed. And I was the first certified interpreter to work here in Salinas. And so after that, naturally, I was in all the programs. And I remember after the accident, the train accident. There was a hearing, an investigation and I was interpreting for the driver and also for the prosecution and the defense of both sides. And then there was another hearing and that was against the Southern Pacific, I don't remember all the details, all I remember is that they brought a lot of the widows from Mexico and the Mexican counsel was here to take care of the hearing because they wanted to know if they were married and how many children they have and all those things. And it was almost a year after the accident happened. So by that time the widows were, they were young like the braceros that died. And the people that have never been to the city and so they were having problems and the Counsel hired me also to take care of them and to also see that they got dressed in the proper way to go to court. (She laughs). You can just imagine how it was because when, like I said, no transportation at that time. And those people would come from very small villages and some way up in the mountains and so they had never been to stores and they wanted to buy real fancy dresses and I had to tell them no. So I had to borrow the counsels ideas on how they should be dressed. So I was involved in so many ways on both sides.

SV: Can you tell me a little bit about, well lets back up. Talk a little bit about the (unintelligible) accident.

SG: Oh, all right. I was (unintelligible), we heard the ambulances going by, and we wondered what happened. It was a lot of noise, all the sirens blowing and pretty soon the phone start ringing. They called right away. They needed me to go there. The policeman and the investigators and a lot of people that were there, so I went. By that time, they had picked most all gone and there were, some of them were already in the hospital others were still there. And so I went around with the investigators, interpreting for them. And we worked late that day, all day. It happened early in the morning. I forgot the time. And we did get to talk to a lot of them. That train accident was one of the biggest but there was another one too. A fire in a bus and some of them got burned. At that time, I was deputized in the district attorneys office. And I went there because they didn't want more than one person to talk to them. So I would go and I had a list of questions to ask them. I'd go there and they were in the hospital after they got burned. There was a fire in the bus.

SV: Do you remember what year that was?

SG: I had the papers at home but when I moved I guess I got rid of them. I don't remember, no, but all I could say it was in the 1960's. I don't remember the years.

SV: Could you tell me a little bit about the grower and the railroad?

SG: The what?

SV: The growers that were working in the railroad? I guess it was the grower and the railroad and then the town. How did they all feel about the accident and the tragedy?

SG: Well some of the growers they wanted to know if any of their own worker.

SG: The growers it was an organization by just the growers and they each had their own ranches and they had a nice person working for them. Of

course he was looking for the future of the growers. Mr. Lopez, I remember his last name. Ben Lopez, he was a very nice person but he would go and talk against the union because they tried to organize them and things like that. But that was his job and otherwise he would give advice to the braceros on what to do because he would tell me. And I said, "well I can't tell them either. I have to be careful also." But we were both very sympathetic to some of the things that went through, especially when they were still worked with a the little hoe. You know bending down and I know that our congressman said he would go and try to, well I forgot what, but anyway, they outlawed it. So I was there to interpret in that case. So they didn't use that and still they don't. But before that they had to kneel down in the, their excuse was that when they used the long handle they'd tear a lot of the plants and close to it they don't. Well that's too bad. At least that was the first good thing that happened.

SV: Can you tell me a little bit about the grower's attitudes. We're trying to get the good stories and the bad stories. Certainly not the whole growers who were probably bad, but do you remember any stories in particular that might reflect the grower's attitudes about the braceros?

SG: Well in the accidents, they were very careful. But I could tell when they knew that was later on when Cesar Chavez was gonna come. If he knew what they knew about it and so did a lot of publicity against it, things like that. That's about all can remember there.

SV: What about your early years working with the food program. Can you tell me a little bit how the town of Salinas welcomed the braceros over there? Did the growers go out? Did they open the camps up for people?

SG: No, when I had the Bracero Program, the locals knew they were needed for the harvesting but at the same time even, the locals were Mexicans too.

SG: They object to having the braceros close to where the families lived because they were also men and they didn't want them close to the children and things like that. So there was always people against it.

SV: You had a lot of interactions with Mexican officials. Did you get the impression from the Mexican officials about the Bracero Program and about the workers?

SG: Well to start with, I'll tell you at that time when the Bracero Program first started we did have Mexican officials. (She laughs). No, I was the first one that was okay and went there and got a job at the city hall and then I remember all the people, "How did you get that job?" They didn't hire Mexicans for any official, (she laughs). That started later on. So I couldn't tell you when the Bracero Program how they would help. The only thing I could remember is the objections that putting them too close or mixed in the same camp as the families, each in a way, maybe they had their own reasons or something. That all I can remember about it. As to any officials, the very first policeman that came was named Olea. He was very nice. Then pretty soon some men were hired and then we had (unintelligible). I ran for the city council. I didn't make it but I missed, they got acquainted with my name and then sooner or later we did get some Mexican officials but not before. We didn't have any at that time.

SV: About how many farmers or growers were working that had braceros that you remember from the first few years?

SG: Well, most every grower.

SV: Most every grower?

SG: And even if they didn't, if they had enough locals to do it. See because years back even the high school kids use to work in the farms during the summer. That's another thing. Some of the Mexicans in Mexico they think, they wonder. Well who did this before we came over?

SG: Well during the summer, the school kids worked in there. And also then they started to bring Filipinos. After the Filipinos a few Mexicans, you know, then the local people. Some kids didn't want to school would work because they got discouraged. They didn't have the opportunities. And I thought well, some day we will have it so I'm gonna stay in school. But

some didn't, they would drop school and go and do the labor work. And those were locals so that naturally they didn't have the problems the braceros did.

SV: Did you actually go to camps to interpret?

SG: Yes, I did. If they were hurt or if there was a witness that didn't want to go over and testify unless they came over to their place. I use to go there with the investigators, with the district attorney.

SV: From your impressions, did the bracero contract workers, do you think it was a positive or negative experience on how they lived here?

SG: For some of them it was a very good experience, others it was negative. It depends how a person reacts to those changes. And so the way they interpret how they are treated and things like that. Everybody's different, you know. I learned a lot. (She laughs). (Unintelligible)

SV: What in your experience were the major complaints?

SG: Well most of it was that some of the growers didn't want to be bothered with getting somebody to interpret and all that. So they start getting contractors. A contractor would go, especially towards the end of the Bracero Program, and they would get the workers and deal with them. And they were the ones that took (unintelligible) and made them worse than the growers. And that's the truth because in Mexico there are some, all the braceros are gone and they're working there as taxi drivers or something. And so one of them told me, "Oh, I don't go back to the states. They discriminate us to much." So then, I says, "And they take advantage of you." I said don't you think it's the same Mexicans. (Unintelligible)

SG: I guess they were. A man saying that because some of the little smarter ones in the offices and got two people think they got their attorneys. And so I was aware of all those things too. I could of (unintelligible) but I didn't want to take advantage of everybody. I wanted to earn, you know, that I earned the money. They thought it was some kind of a thing I could do for free. Now afterwards they paid them real well but they hired

people. They opened offices and they had the *doctores* and all that. Sometimes they just took advantage of them.

SV: Speaking of pay, can you talk a little bit about how much the braceros got paid and what they may have been doing with some of the money?

SG: Yes, they were paid by the hour, the minimum that was okay. And then they found out that that not always. They weren't over for that because especially if it was picking fruit during the season. It was say if they picked everything (unintelligible) and make a lot more money. So there was such competition, that too was another problem. And then there's an end of the season. They couldn't make too much working by (unintelligible) then they wanted to be paid by the hour. So you see the problems are on this side.

SV: Did you get any impression of what the braceros were doing with the money? Where they sending it home? Where they buying nice things here?

SG: Yes, I did. Some of them were very nice. They knew they had children there to support and their wives or their parents if they were single. And they would send the money there but not all of them. A lot of them as soon as they got paid, Friday night or Saturday morning, it was a big weekend for them. And then by Monday they didn't show up to work until Tuesday because they got drunk and here was the boss looking for them. So I got to learn the both sides.

SV: Was there any problems with the merchants and the braceros? Do you recall any problems?

SG: No, I didn't, not about that. Well, sometimes they didn't know how much something was worth but, no, in the stores, I think they were good. There might be some exceptions but they were no bother. As far as I know, they would go shopping and they learned how to handle their money. I thought it went all right. They bought what they wanted to buy. A lot of them bought presents to take back to their families. Like I said there were

- all kinds of people. There were those that would waste their money in China town.
- SV: Did you get any impression of any positive experiences they had for the growers and the work here from the braceros?
- SG: What?
- SV: Any positive reactions to the growers? Anything positive to say about them?
- SG: No, I think they started getting ideas later on after the program was over and they were working. It was other people with good ideas into them. They said there taking advantage of (unintelligible) but they don't know that it's true, the growers can't grow or have things without the braceros. The grower isn't making money and they weren't doing anything to work in, see, (unintelligible). You know the ways I found out that they were taking advantage of them is that at the ones that were sharing profits would start blending strawberries, one gets the money and the other does all the labor and I guess, anyway. Yeah there I did see it.
- SV: A lot of negative?
- SG: Yes. But they were not braceros. (unintelligible). I think the program had it's bad points and then it had its good ones because all over the program they were protected but in certain ways.
- SG: Of course, there was exceptions and all that but sometimes it's easy for people to remember only the bad things and then forget the ones that after wards everything was open. The contractors would take advantage of them and all the men. Those people that especially opened that little office system to make money out of them. That's terrible.
- SV: Have any of the people you helped or worked with, any of the braceros or migrant workers, early on, have they come back? Do you still keep in touch with them?
- SG: I use to but quite a bit but now lately I haven't. Especially since my husband passed away, I moved from where I lived. I use to live at 330

Drive that's at not really east of Salinas but east-south Salinas and at first now they are all mixed but at first that section there were Mexican families living there the new one is mixed. So I got, besides all my close friends had passed away at least the late comers stayed there longer, things changed.

SV: Do you remember what the braceros did during holidays? Did they come into town?

SG: There were a lot of local people like my parents that they didn't neglect the holidays and all that. And I remember that my father would get involved with others and go together and celebrate *5 de Mayo* or *16 de Septiembre* and so a lot of people would attend that.

SV: What did exactly did your father do? Did her organize?

SG: I don't know. He would joined others that organized it and cooperate with them or sometimes they had to donate something to start the party or a big celebration.

SV: Where were the parties? Were they in the camps or in town?

SG: In town in a hall. They rent a hall and they say the *celebración de 5 de Mayo*. That's was it then.

SV: And most of the braceros would come for that?

SG: Everybody.

SV: Everybody.

SG: Especially on September 16 see when Gilroy and Hollister, they're two cities, so the two would get together and it was during the harvest season. So there were a lot of Mexican people that use to come to this part of California just a picking in the harvesting and then they go back to Los Angeles and Texas but they would come over to this part of California for the picking of tomatoes and prunes and all that and as soon they see the bracero they go back and that's what is up to. September is about the ends of the harvest and they needed a lot of people to attend to the fiestas and the bracero's would go to.

- SV: Do you think the bracero, I would imagine the braceros really appreciated that. Did they say anything directly to you about being able to come into town and attend parties like that?
- SG: No, some of them were happy to have something, others would say, "That's not the way we celebrate it in Mexico." You know, comments like that about the world there in another town.
- SV: Did the braceros every stage a strike or protest here? The contracted workers?
- SG: Later on they did but the first ones that came, they didn't.
- SV: Do you remember anyone in particular, later on, working as a translator?
- SG: It started when Cesar Chavez tried to organize the union here and some of them did in favor and some of them were against it. So there was a lot of things happening here, I guess about that time. But that was not the bracero. When they were braceros here none of them went go on strike. Not that I knew of because California is a big state and I mean Salinas, I'm talking about.
- SV: Final reflections. How did the Bracero Program affect you and your work?
- SG: Well I did get a lot of work I am still able to say but especially during when there was the bracero (unintelligible). The two big accidents, the fire and during that and a lot of others. One thing, I think they were able to, they were doing business and that's how they did it. Yeah, but the union at first I really, I told you, I worked in the store. So I was dealing the bracero always. Dealing with the store and dealing the braceros and sometimes they would ask me "Señorita, let me talk to him." And they would go and do it for nothing, just to help them out.
- SV: Overall do you think the bracero experience was a positive or negative?
- SG: That is kind of hard to say because at first it was something that was needed. The men were all in the service or the was a needed to do the work and that was something that was needed to do. I think they weren't

appreciated. But I tell you why, right after the war things started so different. A lot of people, including in Texas and Oklahoma and other southern states, they heard about all the work here in California so they start coming in and by that time they said we don't need the braceros. So that's what happened.

SV: Do you have any final thoughts or reflections about your time working with the braceros?

SG: No, I don't but if anybody asks something, I tell them what it is free of charge. (Both laugh). Sometimes, I think they were going to have a memorial here or something about a month ago, to remember the accident. I don't know what happened but when I saw that in the paper I called up and I said, "Look I was there, if you need any assistance." "Oh, thank you we'll call you." And they never did, so I don't know what happened.

SV: Well I'm sure the town and the families were very appreciative of your help there. Thank you very much.

SG: Well, you're welcome.