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## **Interview no. 1576**

Sebastian Martinez

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

Interviewee: Sebastián Martínez

Interviewer: Karim Ley-Alarcón

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: November 12, 2005

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Transcript No.: 1576

Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Sebastián Martínez was born on November 16, 1938, in Saragosa, Texas; as a child he and his family moved to Pecos, Texas; during the fifties, when he was roughly fourteen or fifteen years old, he began working with his father alongside braceros, chopping cotton and other such field duties; after graduating from high school, he went on to receive a bachelor's degree from Sul Ross State University and a master's degree from the University of Texas at El Paso. Mr. Martínez briefly discusses his family; when he was roughly fourteen or fifteen years old, he began working with his father alongside braceros, chopping cotton and other such field duties; he goes on to discuss his experiences working with braceros, and he gives an account of their living and working conditions, provisions, recreational activities, religion, and their general dispositions; in addition, he explains the relationships between the braceros and the surrounding community in Pecos, Texas, which was largely segregated; several of his female relatives, however, did have romantic relationships with braceros; he also speaks about the children of braceros going to school in Pecos and the subsequent process of assimilation; after graduating from high school, Sebastián went on to receive a bachelor's degree from Sul Ross State University and a master's degree from the University of Texas at El Paso.

Length of Interview 40 minutes

Length of Transcript 15 pages

**Name of interviewee:** Sebastian Martinez

**Date of Interview:** November 12, 2005

**Name of Interviewer:** Karim Lay Alarcon

This is an interview with Sebastian Martinez on November 12, 2005 in El Paso, Texas at the Chamizal National Memorial. The interviewer is Karim Lay Alarcon. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History project.

KA: Mr. Martinez if you'd like to provide me with any background information on yourself, your date of birth, where you were born?

SM: I was born Sebastian Martinez Lee Treviño in Zaragoza, Texas which is the small town in Reeves County. In the early 1940, around 1943, my parents moved to, ah, Pecos. I was born in Zaragoza in November 16, 1938. My dad worked briefly in the railroad around 1942 or 1943 and then we moved to Pecos where he worked, ah, a car dealership. The car dealership owner also had a farm and my dad kept animals at the farm, which we also lived out of, mainly we had a cow that gave us milk, chickens and that kind of thing for us. I went to school, Elementary School and High School in Pecos during the 1950's which was pretty racist at that time in Pecos. I graduated in 1958 went to Sul Ross and got my Bachelor of Science in Education. I taught for a few years and then I enrolled at UTEP Masters Program under a fellowship. Dr. Cross was the coordinator of that and I graduated with a Masters Degree in 1971 in Analysis of English to Spanish and Spanish to English. Which is basically bilingual it didn't have a title then in 1970 but that was what it was. I taught for thirty years and then retired, ah, I've been involved in politics locally, especially with the Democratic Party, but at the same time I'm interested in History. That was my major study when I was working in my Bachelors.

KA: And you currently live in?

SM: I live in El Paso. My homestead is here in El Paso but my parents left me the home in Pecos and so I commute back and forth half the time here and half the time up there.

KA: Okay and what, what compelled you to come today and speak about the Bracero Program?

SM: Well because I looked at the pictures that the newspaper had and then basically, ah, showed the Bracero Program when they were at the initial part. When they were processing the Braceros but it never said anything about what kind of life or what they did after they were in the farms. That's where I come and I worked in some of those farms along side some of the Braceros and we commuted back and forth to the farms, my dad did, to do jobs and also chopped cotton and that kind of thing during the 1950's.

KA: And what can you tell us about that experience working along side Braceros? What was the environment like?

SM: Well, back then, I never heard anyone gripe. They were very happy. They were very....they joked amongst themselves a lot and they kidded with us a lot. I was around fourteen or fifteen when we started working with the Braceros. They kidded with me a lot. The men talked, picking on, on the kids and that sort of thing so it was a very pleasant thing to work along side them. Some of the things that really, ah, were bad was that when they went into the town, into Pecos, they were more or less, ah, herded over to the East side where the Mexican population of Pecos was because the town was very rigidly segregated. East side was the Mexican community and West side was the Anglo community and so they were mostly bused to that area of town and that's the kind of experience that I had, seeing that they, ah, were badly mistreated, in a sense that it was a pretty rough time for them.

SM: But, but they knew that they had the opportunity to make money and send money back home, I think that's what kept them there.

KA: Was there a processing center in Pecos?

SM: No, there was no processing center in Pecos. Most of them were processed probably along the border towns like El Paso, Ojinaga and Loreto and so the farmers there would contract individuals to bring the Braceros to Pecos and would house them in barracks that most of the farmers had bought from Army bases and had barracks almost ideally suited for that type of housing. Some were housed in, in the Army type of, ah, metal rounded, top shelters, ah, and some actually built, ah, long houses where they just put row, put row of cots in, in the barracks. They were just like Army style type thing. They slept right next to each other and some cases, ah, double-decker sleeping cots.

KA: What memory, what memory do you have of those quarters, the cots, the living conditions?

SM: The memories that I have of that event, basically, it was rough from our standpoint, for some of them they said it was pretty good because they had a sleeping cot, they had running water and there was an out-house or several out there in the back. Most of them had cooking facilities where they themselves would do their own cooking and sometimes they would organize themselves and someone would do the cooking for a time and then somebody else would take turns doing that kind of thing. Basically, the farmers would try to keep the barracks as clean as they could. You know sometimes I would go in and, and look and see that everything was more or less in a kind of order and that there was no, no mess anywhere that, ah, contributed to the health hazards of the camp.

KA: And about how many men do you remember being there?

SM: Sometimes there were a few as ten, sometimes as many as thirty or forty depending the size of the barrack and the size of the farm.

SM: Some of these farms were very big, very large farms, so they had a lot; a lot of them housed in, in barracks, one right after the other, and where they moved them about is that they had buses or trucks. They would all

pile into the truck or into the bus and would drive them up to the fields to do the work.

KA: Do you have any recollection of the hiring process? Upon their arrival did they check for documents to make sure they had their permit?

SM: No, I don't recall at any point, during the time that they were there, that anybody would come around to check to see that they were, ah, you know properly documented. Nobody, none of the farmers were worried about that. All they cared was that they had a body to go do the work and nobody came up....they had a name and they apparently paid them by, in that system but there was never, that I recall any inspectors or immigration or anything like that hassling anybody for documentation.

KA: So you were a child?

SM: Well I was not really, I was fifteen at least, fifteen yeah.

KA: You weren't what we consider now, to be an adult?

SM: Well, you know, I was, I was what you might call street wise because I was one of ten in the family and very early, say eleven, I was out there asking for a job.

KA: As far as the salaries of what these men were paid, do you remember?

SM: I don't recall any salaries of anyone because, If I remember, I would work and I was being paid fifty cents an hour, which was pretty good for my age in 1953 and 1954, because I would, after school, I worked on the farm and in the summers and that was what I was paid per-hour. Probably they, they received about anywhere from four to five dollars a day, from what I thought the comparable wage that was going on.

KA: What type of work did they do there? Did they have a choice as to the type of work or even their length of employment?

SM: No, whatever the farm needed done, the foreman, mayordomo, which was usually a local Mexican-American from the town, and he would instruct. "I need this kind of work done, who can do this?" and shortly after the initial assignments it turned that several were good at particular

things that they can do and some already had farming experience, I guess, from Mexico and so they, they would say what kind of work they did and then they were assigned that. But basically, ah, everything was run very efficiently. I don't recall any, any problems with the work that was being done.

KA: And the men did they work six days a week, ah, five days a week? How?

SM: Basically, they worked, I think, about six days a week. I, I'm not sure exactly because by that I meant is that some of them, if I recall, worked on Saturdays and some of them would even volunteer to work on Sundays. Some of them, you know, that was arranged with, with the mayordomo and the farm owner and, but most of them took time to go into town on Saturday nights and, ah, even went to the bars, the cantinas and the whore houses.

KA: What else do you remember as far as their social interactions in Pecos, say on the weekend? Did any of them....

SM: Yeah, most of them of course went into town to, for recreation and there were a lot of cantinas. I recall there was some, some block some city blocks that had anywhere from four to five cantinas. It reminded me of Juarez, here in the 1960's you know where the red light district. Pecos turned into that, at least the East side of town turned into a red light district, because Pecos had basically a population of around six to ten thousand, it varied.

SM: Then the population would swell to as much as fifty-thousand because all men would fill the cantinas and they had to get their recreation somewhere.

There were a lot of woman who serviced the men in the cantinas. Sometimes these, ah, recreational activities became well organized where you had, ah, a man who would buy a bed, would take two or three woman, would go from farm to farm soliciting the business and some of

them did very well. I recall several women who were very poor but eventually ended up with Buick Convertibles.

KS: And by the business, you mean prostitution?

SM: Yes.

KS: Okay, you also come with some stuff that you wish to share?

SM: Oh, yeah, I made an outline basically about some of the things that I recalled. We talked about the housing but I also wanted to talk to you about, ah, how they...the provisions that they bought to feed themselves. What happened was that some of the farmers would form co-ops and have particular co-op stores and, ah, the Braceros would go to these stores. Sometimes they'd pay with cash, sometimes they'd assign it to the farm owner and I don't know how the farm owner made payments or that sort of thing that was done. I remember that many of them shopped at the local Safeway store and, and because all the labels were in English many of them went through a lot of learning. I think, for example, people became aware that they were buying a lot of dog food. A can was very popular amongst some of....carne de tarrito, which had a dog on it, ah, at that time dog meat, the dog food was not like it is today, it actually had horse meat or, you know, beef in it sometimes and that's what they bought. There were actually chunks of meat in, in the can so they bought that but eventually, they were being told that that was specifically for dogs and so they stopped buying that.

SM: Most of them would of course buy the fresh cuts and that sort of thing. That's basically how they would do it. Many of them, Mexican-American, part of town organized....they also had stores, grocery stores, where they would cater to the Bracero. In a way they, they took the business from the co-ops and also the Anglo part of town is that they would have busses go into the fields and, ah, pick up the Braceros in their buses. They would bring them to the stores, would buy the groceries and drive them all the way back and that was



very convenient for the Bracero. Safeway would not do that, neither would the co-ops, they would not do that. That's how Mexican-American population in Pecos, ah, got some of that. In recreation I've already mentioned that, ah, the one aspect of nightlife but they'd also enjoyed swimming in the water tanks, in the irrigation ditches. The water there would run very clean. It was not dirty or muddy at all, because it was pumped out of the ground and they would get very close to where the top was. The thousands of gallons of water coming out of the airport manage sole, that's where they, they'd use that to bathe also and for recreation. They enjoyed, beside cantinas, there were a lot of theaters in Pecos that showed, ah, Mexican movies, Pedro Infante and all of those. They were always full. Saturday nights and Sunday nights all day, full house, because they enjoyed....Probably many of them have never seen films in their own, ah, in their own country. They lived out in the rural areas of Mexico.

KS: The theaters proprietors were they Anglo?

SM: No, they were Mexican-Americans. The Anglos had their own theaters and they showed English films, American films, and, and interpret years on the Mexican-American community would set up their own theaters. Sometimes they were just barracks with a film cam....with a camera and a projector and you know they'd come in for ten, fifteen cents a shot.

KS: You've shared with us the rigid, um, I guess segregation....

SM: Yeah.

KS: That took place in Pecos, um, how were Mexican-Americans treated in Pecos, and then how did Mexican-Americans treat Braceros?

SM: Mexican-Americans were segregated. We went to the Mexican school, we went to, ah, the Elementary schools. We went to those because we were Mexican-Americans of that town. The way that we interacted with the Anglo part was that we held jobs on that other side of town and we went shopping to some of the stores there, clothing stores mostly. But then

shortly after the Braceros came in, some of the Mexican-American entrepreneurs began to put up stores that had clothing and foodstuff, so the population began to shop there. The Anglo community resented, the town itself, resented the influx of Braceros because they were all over town. They filled the side walks and, and that sort of thing, so there was some resentment for that but the business people knew that they needed the Bracero to do the farm work. The Mexican-Americans in the town....yes there was some harsh words about the Bracero mainly because they were interfering with the social life in Pecos. The dance halls were full of Braceros, where before people; local people would fill the dance halls and suddenly you have nothing but Braceros in the dance halls and so there was a lot of resentment about that. People were more rational, I guess, at that point so they had to get along, we had to get along. I don't remember any, any violence any sort of that thing. Yeah there were words but I don't remember any violence. If there may have been and it might be documented in a newspaper articles.

KS: Anything else from your trip?

SM: There was a lot of local inter-marriage with the local women by the Braceros. Not initially but later on they caught on that if you married a local woman then they got to stay.

KS: Local being Mexican-American?

SM: Mexican-American, native born women and some of them caught on, I guess, and once the local law enforcement found out they were married to a local woman or something.

SM: They left them alone. No body ever questioned their citizenship, sent them back, or insisted that they go back into the farms. They stayed in the community in town. I had an aunt who married, ah, Bracero. We found out that she couldn't have any children. He, he abandoned her. I had two cousins, females, who married Braceros, they had families, and the Braceros stayed in. My maternal grandmother, ah, she lived with a

Bracero for a while until my other aunts got scared and insisted that he leave. My grandmother was really enjoying her life too. There were a lot of very large farms. I remember there were the Mattox's the Armstrong's, the Dingle's, the Ivey's. I think some of the Ivey's even moved into this part of town and, ah, they may have some local history and pictures about Bracero life. The other thing that there's a good source that no one has touched on and that is that the local Pecos enterprise has a lot of newspaper articles about Braceros that no one has ever touched.

KS: Right, and you mentioned earlier off tape, off the record that some of those articles portrayed the Braceros in a very negative way.

SM: Yeah, they, they wrote about the negative parts but I'm pretty sure there were articles about what they were doing for the town, for the community because at one point Pecos became celebrated for having the most bails of cotton per-acre and sometimes the first bail of cotton. The seasons come in Reeves County because the Braceros were there.

KS: As a student in high school, I'm assuming that you went to high school every single day, you interacted socially. How did the local high school students react or respond to Braceros? Did those Braceros have kids that went to the schools?

SM: Basically it was too large. We lived a life where I went to the farm and I worked at the farm and after school, in the weekends and summer. But when it came to, to school, I was in a totally different venue because, ah, we needed to acculturate.

SM: We needed to do this, and so it was all focused on an American system, an American life, an American....I learned to speak English immediately with an accent, a cowboy accent, and that's what...It was a total different life. There were a lot of kids that came to school and sure there were a lot of kids that lived in the farms, some from Braceros, who went to school and they went to the Anglo part of the school. They weren't bused to the Mexican school. They actually went to the schools with the other Anglos

and they acculturated very rapidly. It was not a problem until they were overwhelmed in the Anglo classrooms. When they were overwhelmed in the Anglo classroom, then the local school board started to build extra classrooms on the Mexican side and then eventually we were totally segregated again.

KS: Where you ever a witness to any problems while, for example problems at work, any accidents or illnesses that may have come over the Braceros? Where any of them ever hurt?

SM: I do not remember any, like I said, there was no crime that I can recall. There was no, there were no beating of Braceros or anything like that. That I know about. There might be some if we looked through the newspaper articles because newspaper documented everyone who was arrested or given a ticket and that sort of thing. So there might be some in there but I think what helped the Bracero a lot was that he was a very happy, easy going person, knew when to back off and that sort of thing. He was able to, to, ah, to live well in those communities out there.

KS: Right, to maneuver....

SM: Yeah to maneuver and basically most of them stayed in the farm. The only time they came into town was for grocery shopping or for recreation and then that was mostly on the weekends.

KS: Right, you mentioned that Saturday and Sundays the streets and theaters were filled with....

SM: That's when the Anglo community did not come into town. They didn't go to the local shopping strip and that sort of thing. It was left entirely to the Braceros because the Braceros literally filled the sidewalks and so the Anglo community they did their shopping during the weekday. The Bracero took over the town on Saturdays and Sundays.

KS: Was it....did the Anglo community basically just capitulate the weekend for the Braceros or was there any resistance toward that?

SM: The Anglo community knew that they existed because of the farmers and so they did it, you know, yeah let them have it. They had their night clubs and they had their things that they did and their socials at their homes and in their private clubs and that sort of thing. In their country club, ah, and so the Bracero did most of his shopping on Saturdays and Sundays.

KS: Was there one or were there more than one Catholic Church?

SM: There was more than one Catholic Church in town, ah, Saint Catherine's catered to the Anglo and Santa Rosa del Lima catered to the Mexican community. There were very few Braceros who went to the Catholic Church. Most of them did not go to Church because I remember, ah, being in the Church and there were few Braceros. Most of them stayed in the farm. What was happening is that the evangelical groups were going to the Braceros and were evangelizing the Braceros in groups and I guess they made some conversions. I know that there was an article in Time magazine where someone documented that the priest was gripping about the evangelical work that these guys were doing because they literally had these men captive in the barracks.

SM: I suppose that the farmers, the owners, allowed that, you know. There was nothing about allowing the Catholic priest to go in and that sort of thing.

KS: So were the new owners, for the most part, were they protestant?

SM: The owners were mostly protestant, yeah. There was a very small Catholic Anglo community in Pecos.

KS: So as far as the celebrations of Easter and Christmas....did, you see the Bracero community....

SM: The Bracero community did not participate in the town, in those activities. I don't know what they did for themselves and I'm pretty sure that they didn't have the concept of Christmas like we do about gift giving and decorations and that sort of thing. I think Christmas was something different.

- KS: Did Pecos ever experience any organized protests against the Braceros or, like you mentioned before, did they view the Bracero as an economic necessity?
- SM: It was an economic necessity and you know rational people knew that and a lot of business owners knew that they depended on the Bracero so they cooperated. I never heard that there was a protest against Braceros. You know there might have been some racial bigots out there who were vocalizing their hatred but Braceros were needed.
- KS: Right, and as far as the term Bracero what is your recollection, what was it viewed as? Using the word Bracero in Pecos by a Mexican-American was it a negative connotation?
- SM: Mexican-Americans in town used the word Bracero against someone who....from the other side. Basically the Bracero meaning that it was people who had to heat their homes with brasas from the coal that they burn. That's where the word Bracero comes from.
- SM: Ambers in English, they would burn wood outside, would bring the ambers in a tub and put them in the middle of the building to heat themselves. That's where brasas came from the Braceros.
- KS: That's interesting. I've almost always heard that it comes from the word brazos because they used their arms for labor so you bring another side to that story.
- SM: No, Bracero no. Bracero means people who heated their homes with brasas.
- KS: In general, your memories as a young man growing up in Pecos around Braceros....are your memories positive or negative?
- SM: Very positive.
- KS: Very positive.
- SM: Very positive because when I was in the farms and after the Bracero would get off of work, you know, hey I enjoyed going in and taking a

- taco, a burrito or whatever they were making and they always kidded with me and I was fourteen and fifteen. They joked and that sort of thing.
- KS: Did you ever notice perhaps one or two men that being a Bracero may have changed their lives or did they just pretty much all go in work, once their permit expired....
- SM: Well, like I told you at the very beginning, most of them didn't know what it was all about. They came and worked but soon they came to interact with the Mexican-American community and they found something similar. The language the food that sort of thing and so they began to realize that it wasn't so bad. Once you got out of the farm, you could stay in town and many of them tried that by intermarrying or finding a place to stay in Pecos because sometimes I never heard that the farmer wanted the Bracero to go back home after, you know, a season.
- SM: If he could keep an experience Bracero, he wanted to keep the experience Bracero because he knew how to do the things that needed to be done in the farm and that's what the farmer wanted to do many times is to keep them around. I never heard of anyone getting rid of experienced Braceros.
- KS: Where many of them, you think....since the farmer wanted to keep them, did many of them stay illegally?
- SM: (He laughs) I tell you, if they did, no one ever thought about them being illegals. No one ever thought about them being illegals.
- SM: They were just part of the community who were doing a job and there was nowhere any effort to round them up and send them home. The farmers wanted to keep them. They needed them there. They didn't care about legalities. You know they might around the processing centers and that kind of thing, around the border here, but Pecos is about two hundred and ten fifteen miles from here.
- KS: Any final thoughts as far as the history of Bracero, I mean, what sort of heritage do you think its going to leave the United States?

- SM: Well, you know, there might have been a few wars back, you know a hundred years or so, taking over territories but its quite obvious that the territory is coming back, basically coming back to mestizo in a very peaceful manner. Their all moving in here, we moved in here or we married into them or we have family and extended family and so it's a very positive thing. It was from the very beginning. It was economics and economics again today is determined in how we live, either were neighbors or enemies or even Iraq war. It's not a war of politics, its an economic war, we know that. The guys in Iraq, all the other guys out there....all the Arabs know that the reason why we're up there is just to make sure we keep the oil.
- KS: Its rather timely, I think, that the current administration is kind of playing with the same concept of the Braceror program. They want to have a guest worker....
- SM: Well they take and own everything. Someone has to give something, in other words, the Bracero wants to come here and everybody knows that we need the Bracero or we need the worker any kind of worker and so where do you compromise? The Mexican government says "Look besides you guarantee them the rights and privileges of the Constitution, you also should give them economic benefits, you should give them Constitutional benefits." And that's what....It is all trickling down to that.
- SM: The United States cannot bring over another two-million individuals and then by the end of the winter ship them back home. That's logistically almost impossible.
- KS: Any final comments?
- SM: No, I'm glad someone has finally decided to write down the histories. I wish I had more or less been motivated to do some of this...because my dad was telling me histories of my great grandfather who was a mule traitor from, from Mexico coming in to Fort Davis and trading with the soldiers at Fort Davis in the 1860's. My grandfather would trade food and



supplies with the Indians for horses. The horses belonged to the solders at Fort Davis and my grandfather would take the horses back to Fort Davis and trade them for guns and money.

KS: Well it was a pleasure sitting with you and interviewing you. I'm sure that anyone who listens to this, whether at UTEP or the Smithsonian, will have a lot of information that they can get from this.

SM: It was my pleasure, thank you.

KS: Thank you.

DRAFT