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Fred DeYoung

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
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Interviewee: Fred DeYoung

Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

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Fred DeYoung was born in Seattle Washington on February 17, 1947. His family was poor and worked mostly as laborers, or in white collar jobs which paid little money. He attended high school in Salinas, California. At that time, in an effort to teach his son the difficulty of hard labor, and the value of education, Mr. DeYoung's father required him to work in the fields. So, in 1963, during the summers after his sophomore and junior years in high school, he worked on a Bracero lettuce harvesting crew. He went on to graduate from University, and became a businessman. Mr. DeYoung describes the work-a-day lives of Braceros on a lettuce harvesting crew; he defines "hoeing and thinning" and the difference between this type of work and "harvesting;" he details the process of harvesting lettuce and provides job descriptions for the multiple roles this process requires including, cutters, spreaders, clampers, stitches, wind rowers, and loaders; he lists the type of clothing items the workers would wear in the fields; he discusses the quality and type of food Braceros ate, as well as the conditions of the labor camps and barracks; Mr. DeYoung also describes the leisure and weekend activities of the Braceros including soccer, letter writing, card playing, movie-going, church-going, shopping, and eating at local Mexican restaurants; he characterizes the men on his crew as good, hardworking, church-going, family men with a great sense of humor, who treated him and the other local high school students on their crew like cousins or nephews, and who protected them from outside abuse of any kind; he expresses his belief that, though being away from their families must have been very difficult, the Bracero program was beneficial to them and their families, and the conditions of the program in his area were "a step up" from those in Mexico; finally, he expresses a desire for history books to reflect the contributions of Braceros and the Mexican culture in general to California, and for the history of the Bracero Program to be told from the points of view of Braceros and agribusiness owners.

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Today is July 28, 2005. I am at the Steinbeck Center. My name is Kristine Navarro. I am interviewing Mr. Fred DeYoung. Good Morning!

FD: Good Morning.

KN: How are you this morning?

FD: Just fine, thanks.

KN: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up. Please.

FD: I grew up in Salinas, as a youngster in a very poor family. My movement into the Bracero Program happened when my dad was sure that he wanted to teach me the value of a good college education. So rather than being a bag boy at a grocery store, he wanted me to work in the fields, which I did.

K.N Your dad's name, please.

FD: Fred DeYoung

KN: O.K. Now tell me what that experience was like, and at what age you started.

FD: It was between sophomore and junior year. I worked a summer with a company called Christianson Brothers. And I got the job by going down to the unemployment agency, and they placed me into the fields.

KN: What was that like for you? Going…

FD: Well, it was unique. I had never been to a bureaucratic type of organization, so it was, uh, inhibiting. Got the job, went out, and my first day in the fields I didn't know what to do. It took me two hours to ride my bicycle in the dark to get to the labor camp. And then, we started at six o'clock. Hopped on a labor bus, went out, and finished that day close to nine o'clock at night. So that was my first day in the fields.

KN: Were you exhausted?

FD: Yeah. Actually, I couldn't ride my bicycle home. My mom had to come pick me up. I couldn't physically move. So I went home...I was asleep in the car, asleep before she could even get any food in me. Because we had no dinner that night, we had a lunch but no dinner, lunch in the fields, so… That was, uh, how I got going.

KN: Tell me, your first day on the job, the initial reaction. I mean, you're…

FD: Well, it was interesting. I had one year of high school Spanish, so I had very limited ability to be able to speak to the guys. The uh, so…I mean, I learned pretty quickly. In a week or two, I learned a whole new form of slang Spanish. I just call it "gutter Spanish." They got a kick out of teaching young Americans, you know, how to swear. So that was a big thing, we got a big kick out of it. They loved that. And, they loved it when we swore.

KN: Now, did you know what you were saying? Or was it…

FD: Oh, of course!

KN: O.K. [laughing]

FD: We figured that out very quickly. So, I still have that Spanish in my head.

KN: Now, I understand there's a story about what you wore the first day.

FD: Oh yeah. First day, I didn't know what to wear. We ended up wearing, like, flannel shirts, if it was cool in the mornings. But, I had an absolutely canary yellow sweatshirt, hooded sweatshirt. So, the guys were great, they kinda were, kinda like little brothers after a while, if they liked you, if the crew liked you. Our crew was thirty-two, and we were a harvesting crew of lettuce. And, uh, if they liked you they came up with nicknames. And so, they called me the Amarillo, the Yellow, for my yellow sweatshirt, which was kinda crazy, but that's what it was.

KN: Now did it stick with you for the rest of the…

FD: Oh, for the whole summer, they called me Amarillo. I didn't know if it was because of my sweatshirt, or what, but that's what they called me.

KN: How did you find out?

FD: Well, they said it openly. So, I asked the, uh, we had a big foreman, his name was Moley. He was huge. I mean I was 6'4", he was bigger than me. And, uh, he kinda told me that, "Hey, the guys like you, because they gave you a nickname." So it stuck. So whenever they wanted me, they didn't say, "Hey, Fred" or "Hey, boy" or "muchacho." It was, "Amarillo! Viene aqui. Come here."

KN: Tell me a little bit about the language. Was that a barrier? Was it not?

FD: Oh yeah. High school Spanish, here locally, was Castilian Spanish, it was very formal Spanish. And I had one year in it, which means I really didn't know much. Irregular verbs, a few regular verbs, you know, not a whole lot. And so, it was like a crash course. I had never been exposed to Spanish outside of classroom Spanish. And Mexican Spanish is really different, way different, the verbs are different. So, I mean, I

learned that, went on to take some more Spanish, lived in Mexico. Later, when I was about twenty, I lived in Mexico for about a year, because I had such a positive experience working with the Braceros that, really, I liked them culturally. So I went down and lived in Mexico for a year, and had a ball down there. So, the language was a real barrier for me to start with, but it was no time at all and I was learning to pick up the words I needed to, you know, to use to work in the crews.

KN: Tell me a little bit about your daily routine out in the fields.

FD: I would get up at four in the morning, eat a breakfast, get on my bicycle, strap a flashlight on it because I'd be peddling to work in the dark. I'd get to the labor camp, oh maybe, 5:45. It took me almost two hours to peddle to the camp, it was a long ways away from where I lived. Get to the camp, check in, get on the labor bus with the crew. We'd go out, and we'd wait to see if we were harvesting that day, which we all liked to do, because, we were on a piece rate. We had a very fast, very hardworking crew, and so, we'd make more money. But, some days we'd go out and hoe and thin, or basically chop weeds, or cut new growing lettuce out so that the other lettuce would have room to grow. So, that was probably the most miserable job.

KN: Why?

FD: We all worked with the short handled hoes. I still have my hoe.

KN: Do you really?

FD: Yeah, it's great. It's pretty worn out, but I still have it. And uh, that was really, really hard work. It was what they call "stoop labor." And being 6'4" with long legs, it was…it was hard enough for everybody else, even when you're in shape for it…but, it was very difficult for me. So, it took two or three weeks before I could hoe and thin, and stand up, and be able to straighten up. It was…

KN: Tell me, can you explain what "hoe and thin" is for someone who…

FD: Sure. Lettuce is a row crop, so you walk down between two rows, and you'd work two rows of lettuce. When they seed the lettuce, put the seeds in, they all grow right next to each other. The lettuce has to have room to grow. It needs about a foot for the leaf structure. So, you'd have to take out little teeny plants. And, you'd take out weeds. Basically, sometimes we would hoe or thin, "thin" lettuce is thinning it as I just described, "hoeing" would be taking weeds out. So, it depends on where the crop was along the way. That's what they did with us when there wasn't crops to harvest. And we got paid minimum wage when we did that. Which was, I think in those days, somewhere around a buck, maybe a buck and a quarter an hour. But when we were working crews, you know, you could make two, three, four dollars an hour.

KN: And how could you do that?

FD: Well, it depends on what you did on the crew. If you were a cutter…Different people got different rates.

KN: Could you describe each position?

FD: Yeah. I started out as a cutter, which is…you had a knife, and you cut the lettuce, take a couple pieces of leaves off, and you'd set it in rows. And then, the next person would come up would be the clamper and the stitcher. There'd be somebody in the middle, be called a spreader. And what they would do, is take eleven to thirteen boxes at a time off the truck. They were being stitched on the truck, thrown down to the spreader, the spreader would then take the boxes, spread them over the sixteen rows on both sides of the trucks. You're dropping that behind the cut heads of lettuce. Then, there'd be a guy with a water pack, and he would spray the milk off the lettuce, because when you cut it with the knife it would milk up. And then those would be loaded into boxes, like a little teeny baby wheelbarrow with a box on it. And they'd wheel it, one guy would load it, and another guy would come in, clamp the box, and another guy would stitch the box shut. And then they'd throw it on the ground, and then the other wind rowers, which is what I ended up doing, you have to take it from all those rows, down to two rows alongside the truck. Then, you have the loaders, which I ended up doing too because I was a big kid. And we would throw the, you know, anywhere from twenty-five to sixty pound boxes up to the loaders on the truck. And, they were the highest paid, the loaders were the highest paid. And the lowest paid were the spreaders and the cutters.

KN: Wow. Can you tell me a little bit about, umm…and you worked from dawn to dusk then.

FD: Pretty much. When there was…If the market was good, we'd work from dawn 'til after dark. They had a couple lights on the trucks, but not much. But, we'd work a little after dark, long days, really long days. We'd break for lunch, and we'd eat in the fields. They'd bring hot food out, which was part of the program. They'd deduct a little bit of money from your salary. And, the food was fabulous.

KN: Really? Tell me about the food, because we've heard different stories about the food.

FD: Oh, the company I worked for was a small company. I think they only had two or three harvesting crews. And, uh, maybe I was really fortunate, but I never met anybody else of my area, or my group, that ever worked in the fields, so I couldn't compare notes with how the other companies were. But, we were treated well, and the men were treated well. And the labor camps, I mean, they had nice bedding, nice, clean facilities. And good food. But the food would be, typically, some sort of stew. In which, you take about a half a loaf of white bread, and you dip it in the stew. And they had soda pops, and Nehi Orange, naranja, was the most popular one. But, uh, we'd have sodas. Some of them were strawberry sodas, but they… And, they all called them "sodas." That was the American word for soda pops, I guess – "sodas." And they'd have sodas, we'd eat bread, and we'd dip it into the stew. Sometimes we'd have tortillas instead of bread, but it was a

lot of bread. And we'd have very hearty lunches. Never had dinners. If we worked through the dinner hour, we just kept working. So there was no break for dinners.

KN: Was that your choice, or the choice of…

FD: No, it was the choice of the farmers. That was probably the only thing I would say, they should have done something different about that. But then, you know, it didn't happen every day. Only when the market was really high, did we work really late. If it was a good market, in other words, the price was high, we'd just keep cutting 'til we dropped.

KN: Now, at night its… I believe that it'd be a little bit more dangerous to work in the fields and the…

FD: Not too bad. It was just…

KN: Not too bad?

FD: No, no. Particularly if the moon was out. But we didn't work past 9:30 or 10:00, that was it. I mean, that's a long, long day.

KN: And you did this how many days a week?

FD: Oh, uh, sometimes seven. But, usually five or six. Because it was a small farming organization, sometimes we'd cut other people's fields to keep us busy. But mostly, it was our own fields. So, the hoeing and thinning you'd go home at 5:00. But, when we were harvesting, that's when we made the good money, and that's what everybody wanted was to make more money. And, being a piece-rate crew, we worked really hard. The guys I worked with were really hard workers – mostly family men. I heard somebody say that they thought most of the Braceros were single, but in my crew, the bulk of them were family men. And older, maybe thirty to fifty, where I was, I think I was sixteen and a half, or seventeen then. And so, they were older, almost like uncles. And they're good, good folks.

KN: Tell me a little bit about the men that you worked with…about the crew.

FD: The crew…because they were family…hardworking…Every once in a while, you get somebody that's not so hardworking, and they'd use peer pressure. And that person wouldn't last. I don't know where they ended up. Whether he went home, but he wouldn't stay on the crew. We had a really fast crew, and they wouldn't put up with slow labor. So they peer pressured them out. And then, the foreman, that person just wouldn't show up the next day. I don't know where they went. Maybe they went back to Mexico. And once, we had one bad fellow. He thought it was a lot of fun…when you were going through the labor bus, you have to go between two rows of seats, these aren't seats, they're like long benches…and he would goose you. Which was really bad, and he thought it was really funny, and…But anyway, the fellows ended up taking care of him in

the labor camp, and he never did it again. So, the next day he showed up and his face was bruised. So, it looked like they, they had taken care of the issue. Because, they were very protective of their crew.

KN: A very, uh…now did you all…how long did you work? How many summers did you work?

FD: Two summers.

KN: Two summers.

FD: Yeah. I started out cutting, and then I was a spreader, and then I was a clamper. As I became bigger physically…When I first started, I probably weighed 140 pounds dripping wet, 6'1", 6'2". Then, I went to 6'4" and probably weighed about 235. I was a football player, basketball player. I was big, and strong. So, I moved over to wind rowing and loading because I was just big. And, uh, which was the most physically demanding, but also you got paid the most. And it was the prestige job on the crew, besides the stitcher. The stitcher was the number one besides the foreman. And that was usually one person, and they made the boxes. And that was the nicest job, because it was not physically demanding, and yet, got the highest rate of pay.

KN: Now, you said your father had wanted you to make…for this experience. Did it work?

FD: Yeah. Umm, I have to say this—I've done a lot of different jobs, and a lot of them were a lot easier. I lifeguarded, I worked at grocery stores as checkers, bag boys, going through school, through college. I've never seen anything, or worked as hard as I did when I worked in the fields. I mean, when I came home, I was just dead tired. I remember the first day I came home, uh, that my face was just dark with dirt because I was cutting. And when you don't know what you're doing, a lot of times you'll pull the plant up and the dust blows in your face. And it was just terrible, terribly hard work. Stoop labor was really hard. Hoeing and thinning, I think, was the worst for me. I didn't mind picking up boxes, and moving boxes, heavy boxes. Physically, I could handle that. The other hard thing was, is walking between the rows, because of the raised…so you had to watch your feet. But you got used to it. It was kind of like, maybe, a seaman gets used to swaying in a boat, you get used to walking on irregular ground.

KN: Did they help teach you…Did the other crew members help teach you how to do these certain jobs?

FD: Yeah. They did. I remember when I was struggling for each job, like clamping and stitching. I did all the jobs. And I didn't know what I was doing. And I was fumbling and I was…as a cutter, I was terrible. You know, I just couldn't get it. So, after two weeks, they said, "O.K. Enough of the cutting, he's not gonna get it." So I moved up to some better jobs. But, uh, they were great. The foremen weren't particularly nice, they were rough. They swore a lot and, uh…but the crews, uh,

protected….There were four local high school kids on our crew. And all of us came on about the same time. I was the youngest of the group. And all of us worked about two or three summers. And all of us came from very poor families. All of us had to work to help contribute. Our moms, generally, worked in the carrot sheds packing carrots. Our dads had jobs, but not high paid jobs, but regular work. So, we all had to help out. And then, the crews all protected us in a lot of ways, and taught us, and nurtured us. So that's why I was excited to talk about this, because it was a very positive experience for me.

KN: And how do you think the experience was on the men themselves? The traveling and, how that affected them without their families.

FD: It was hard for me to get…to tell you everything, because of my limited Spanish. Second year, I had two years of Spanish in, but I still hadn't lived in Mexico. And my Spanish was two years of high school Spanish, plus learning how to, uh, swear like crazy in slang Spanish. But, uh, the feeling I had is the family men—they'd always show me pictures of their kids if they had pictures. They were very proud of their families—strong, culturally, very strong family men. Almost all of them went to mass on Sundays—they were churchgoers. Hardworking guys—really dark-skinned from working in the sun so much. They had different types of hats. Where we wore cowboy hats, types of western hats, they had different types of straw hats that they came up with, but they still were really dark. Their hands were dark. A lot of us wore long-sleeved shirts. And, uh…but, good family people. My impression was, great family unit, great humor in the culture.

KN: Really? Tell me about that.

FD: Yeah. They laughed, they had a good time, they liked to tease. And we were always the brunt of it because we were the kids. So, we always took the teasing. And then, we got to where we would tease back, and have a ball with that. And it was just great fun. And the other three guys I worked with, we worked together for two years.

KN: Do you remember their names, by chance?

FD: Yeah. One was, uh, his name was Sanchez. The other one, name was Lucas, he was a quarterback of our football team, and he was a loader too. So, it was really good. It was like being in the weight room. My son's at university now, and he plays football, and they have to go to the weight room. For us, working in the fields was our weight room. And uh, I don't remember the fourth fellow. I just can't remember…he was kinda quiet. But, the other three of us were pretty rambunctious, we had a good time.

KN: And did you…Now, after you worked in the field, did you all stay together in high school?

FD: Until we graduated. Then, the other two…one of them ended up having a difficult time and ended up getting shot by the police—had a tough time with drugs. The

other fellow, I don't know where he ended up, but he ended up as a laborer somewhere in construction. And the other fellow, I just don't know.

KN: And yourself?

FD: I'm the only one that, probably, went on to college. And, uh, ended up becoming a business person. And uh, having benefited from my experience in the fields, I guess. You know, learning what I wanted in life.

KN: Can you tell me…can we go back to the conditions of, umm, the barracks, and the…

FD: Yeah.

KN: Can you talk a little bit about that?

FD: Yeah. The labor camp…clap-sided buildings made of wood, with a center court, with mostly dirt but some gardens. And the fellows would play soccer, they'd get a soccer ball, a futbol, and they would play soccer. It would be one of the things…you didn't see basketball hoops like we would have as kids. But theirs' was soccer, that was what they enjoyed. And inside their barracks, uh, of course there was no air conditioning, the air conditioning was windows, but it wasn't really warm. Bunk beds…the kind of beds I had when I was in the army, just bunk beds, looked like army surplus bunk beds. And, uh, they had tables where you could sit around and talk, play cards, write letters – a lot of them were letter writers, most of them were letter-writers, and they'd get letters from home. And, in those days, they'd send their money, I'm almost sure it was Western Union—they would wire the money home. But, they were here to make money, send the money back to their families, or to their mothers if they were single.

KN: How did they cash their checks?

FD: I don't know.

KN: Do you know?

FD: I don't know.

KN: Or acquire the money orders? Did someone do that for them, or…?

FD: Well, there were places…They'd go to Western Union, I know they…because they said that to me that they'd go down to Western Union, and then they would buy…I guess, they would give them the cash, and then they would wire the money to their parents for a very small fee. They said that was the best, because there were places that were ripping off the workers, and charging exorbitant rates to move money. But, they talked about Western Union as being a good deal.

KN: Now, did they kind of know those places that were ripping them off and they would become…

FD: Yeah. I don't know how they knew, because we didn't have a lot of exposure to other labor camps. But maybe it was the experienced fellows that had been there for some time, would let the new fellows know what…the ins and the outs—where to go to theaters, where to go to restaurants when they went into town. They'd walk into town. We were four miles, five miles out of town, and they'd walk into town. One fellow had a bicycle; it was pretty beat up, but he'd ride in. But everybody else, pretty much, just walked into town.

KN: Tell me a little bit about the theater. You said that they knew which theater to go to, did some not allow them, or…?

FD: Well, there was a theater that showed Spanish-speaking movies. So, they would go there. They found that, and they found the good Mexican restaurants right away. That's how we always knew if it was a good Mexican restaurant. If you walked in and everybody was speaking Spanish, we knew the food was great there.

KN: Do you remember the name of the theater, by chance?

FD: Yeah, it was, uh the…Cinderella…I think it was out in the Alisal, which is East Salinas. Where, in those days, it was pretty much the Dust Bowl "Okies" from Salinas. They'd moved out of the fields into the packing sheds. And then, the Braceros moved into the fields. What we were doing was field packing, in those days, rather than packing in the sheds. So, we were field packing and then, they would take them to the trains from there and the trucks.

KN: Now, field packing—can you describe that a little bit, please?

FD: Field packing is, basically, there was no machinery. There was a stitching truck that would make the boxes, that would follow right behind the cutters. And then, there would be trucks that we would load to throw…We'd pack the boxes in the field. We would never leave the field, except for to use the porta-potties, and that was it. No running water, well, we had water igloos and stuff for water, but no running water to wash your hands type of thing. But we'd eat in the fields. So, we never left the fields. All day, we were in the fields, one pass after another. We'd make a pass, sixteen rows wide, 'til we were done with that field, and then, we'd transit to another field. But, we would physically pack all the boxes, in the field. And then, we'd load them on the truck. The trucks would take them away, either to the train depot, or to long haul trucking companies.

KN: Can you tell me what…did you ever see, or encounter, or talk to, umm, government inspectors or Mexican officials that came in to inspect the area?

FD: Never Mexican officials, ever. I always knew when the bosses were coming. Either the bosses of the Christianson Brother Farms, or the Ag inspectors would come in. And the Ag inspectors, you could just feel the tension in the crew when they'd come around. Because, even though we were all there, they were there legally, it made them nervous when bureaucrats would come around. Because, what the Ag inspectors would do—would look at the lettuce, tear them out to check the…they'd grade the lettuce heads a, b, c, d I think, or 1, 2, 3,4. And the better quality heads, we would get a piece of the profit or piece of the action. So, if they undergraded the quality of the lettuce, we wouldn't be paid enough. We'd be, umm…get the short end of the stick on a deal like that. So every time the inspectors came in, and I think they worked for the government, might have been the federal government, I'm not sure, but it made everybody very nervous. Because, we were worried about them grading our lettuce incorrectly so that we wouldn't be paid enough.

KN: And did you ever…did that ever happen…situation happen, or?

FD: Only once. And what happened is, one of the owners, one of the Christiansons, came back to explain to the…in front of the, uh, foreman, and the foreman explained it to all of us, that they had misgraded the lettuce, and that we would be paid the difference.

KN: And were you, to your knowledge?

FD: Yeah. Because we got a supplemental check the next week.

KN: Oh, O.K.

FD: We got paid weekly.

KN: And tell me a little bit about the owners of the farm, themselves.

FD: Well, we didn't see them very often.

KN: You didn't?

FD: No. Because it was a small farm, I think they did their own selling, their own buying of boxes, and all that. So, they didn't come out a lot to the fields. We'd see them once in a while drive pick-up trucks, but we didn't see them often. Mostly, our contact was our crew boss, whoever that was. I had two crew bosses in two summers. One was a short Filipino fellow that was meaner than the dickens, he was a junkyard dog, he was really mean.

KN: Do you remember his name?

FD: No. And, probably because I don't want to. He was really tough. He threatened everybody, everyday, that he was going to fire me, you know, in his Filipino accent. But

our other boss, Moley, the big guy, he was a big, heavy-set guy. He was fair, and the guys liked him. But our crew really didn't care for the Filipino boss.

KN: Was he ever physical with any of the…?

FD: No. No, I didn't see any of that. He was just mean-spirited, and yelling and screaming all the time.

KN: Now, did the same…the second year, did the same crew, most of the members, come back? Were they able to come back?

FD: Uh, there were people the second year, that were on my crew the first year because they worked together well. But, what they generally do is, second year crews would, uh…they try to balance second year crews out with new people so that the teams, or the crews, would all be pretty…they'd have somebody to show them the ropes. So, not all of them were back on our crew. But, some…there were a lot of returnees. I believe that the fellows came up, felt like they were making good money, and that it was a good thing for their families.

KN: Do you think it was fair, the program, the Bracero program?

FD: I can't…I don't know. Politically, I don't know. My microcosm was just that one labor camp that I drove my bicycle out to everyday. The guys were happy, they weren't complaining about the… Later, when I went to college, I heard that there were farmers that took advantage of the Braceros, I heard this and that. And my whole experience was, the Christiansons took good care of their crews—took good care of, uh, both our pay, because we were paid pretty well, and I didn't hear any grumbling, food was good, beds were good, there were clean barracks. I didn't hear any of that, because you would hear about it. The guys I talked with, the Braceros, they'd talk about, uh, going into town, and drinking, getting borracho, drunk, and all that. And they talked openly, so if there was problems, I would have heard of it.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about what they did on the weekends, that you know of?

FD: Oh, yeah. Generally, Sundays was their day. Although, sometimes, Sundays we worked. A good portion, would go to mass on Sunday mornings. And then, they'd go shopping. And they'd buy shirts, and stuff. And sometimes they would send American goods home. But they would stroll…the lower end of Main Street was one of their favorite areas because there was a lot of shops down there that, they catered to the Bracero Program. It was good business for them, good for the Braceros to go there, buy socks, boots. Because, uh, we mostly wore blue jeans, everybody out there, with work boots, work socks, sometimes flannel shirts, sometimes denim shirts, but light shirts, and then, sweatshirts, or vests. A lot of the guys had vests that they wore. And everybody wore hats, straw hats. It wasn't baseball cap time yet; it was before the baseball caps. But, it was all straw hats.

KN: Now, when you say some of the items that the stores…Do you believe that it helped the local economy when they went in to purchase all these goods?

FD: Well, certainly. I certainly believe that. I don't know how many Braceros were in the area. But there had to be thousands in the Salinas market. And they'd go to movies, they'd go to the restaurants, I mean, they…Truly, they would try not to spend…I think most of them sent most of their money home. So maybe it didn't…maybe the single guys would spend their money. But they spent money locally. And, I'm certain that that was helpful for the economy.

KN: Now, do you know if they were charged for rental…for, like, the bedding or,…none of that, just food?

FD: I don't. I know that they deducted…I think, we paid 35 cents for lunches, they deducted every day. And that was a heck of a deal. And they talked about, that was the cost of putting the lunch out. I don't know how they put it out for 35 cents, but they did. And sodas were like a dime type of thing, so…

KN: So they would bring the lunches to you out in the field, and you would just rest, and…

FD: Yeah. Yeah, in these stainless containers…we'd eat it out of stainless, like, army trays, with sections in them. And we had stainless silverware. And, we'd just squat and sit in the fields. And we'd eat right in the fields. A lot of us ate lettuce. Lettuce was great to eat, tasty. Hearts of lettuce were always great. But, after a while, that gets a little old. So, but the food was fabulous in the fields. I mean, I used...My mom used to pack me a sack lunch, which I'd put in my little pack, and I'd peddle my bike out. But, after about the fourth day, I said, "You know, I want to eat with the guys." And the food was really good, so…

KN: Tell me a little bit about the bike ride. And, I mean, that was two hours to and two hours from…?

FD: Yeah, it was pretty rough to start with. And the other thing is, at four o'clock in the morning, I didn't have a light on my bike, so I had to strap a flashlight to it, and if the batteries went dead—you had to be careful. Because, there's a lot of people going to work in the fields in the morning, or going to work in the mornings—you had to be careful of the cars. But it was just part of the deal. You know, it's to get to work, to make money, to help the family. And, it's not like we had the money for gas to be able to drive me to work. And we only had one car in our family, and it was a beater. So, it was bicycles for me.

KN: Can you tell me about your impression of the Bracero Program overall?

FD: I wish I knew more about the microcosm I was in. Because that was really a pleasurable thing for me. I enjoyed the guys, I enjoyed their company, I enjoyed the way we interacted. I can't speak about the Bracero Program outside of that little, my small experience in that area. But what I can speak for is the happiness, and the humor that they always…out crew was always happy. And I've worked in a lot of places over the years, had a number of different businesses, and it's real easy to read people if they're not happy, or if they are happy. And this was just a happy environment. So our crew's…I think it was a really good program. They sent money home, they came back, they enjoyed it, it gave them some, I guess, ability to be able to live better from where they came from. Having lived in Mexico, I see where they lived, and where they lived up here. People say, "Well, gee, if they lived in labor camps, and were in cots, and things, and bunk beds…" But a lot of the fellows that I, later, two or three years later, saw in the fields—I watched crop dusters come and spray right over them. That never happened when I was in the fields, here. I saw farmers pulling plows of burrows [burrs?], when I lived in Mexico. I saw, terrible conditions—candles, kerosene lanterns no electricity, baths done in canals with pesticides in them, children taking baths in pesticides. So, truly, the conditions here wasn't five star hotels, but my comparison after, three years later, living in Mexico, was, I can see why a lot of them were happy with their conditions. It was certainly a step up.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about the spraying? You said that was not done while you all were in the fields?

FD: Never happened with the crop dusters, when I was in the fields. Never. Never heard of it happening. But when I was down in Culiacan, living down in some of the agricultural areas, it was a common practice for them to have, uh, people in the fields when they were spraying.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about…Did you ever hear any stories about the experiences of the processing of these gentlemen from Mexico to the U.S.?

FD: They never talked about it.

KN: Really?

FD: Yeah. Uh, never spoke to me about it. Uh, I think they just…I don't know if it was a bad experience, good experience…I think it was just an experience that they figured they just gotta get through to get here.

KN: Do you think most of them remained in the U.S.? The people that worked on your crew.

FD: I don't…I…I think there's a higher percentage than people think. Umm, it was interesting, today, I was watching the Smithsonian group do a little program. And, there was probably 10 or 15 Braceros there that live here, that were in the Bracero Program. And so, I suspect that there's a couple, two, three generations…They were the first

generation in their families, and then their families came and joined them in some manner.

KN: Did you ever get the sense that, for the men themselves, their family, missing them was just very hard on them?

FD: Oh, it was terrible. That was the part…even though they took such pride in showing their pictures and talking about their niñas and niños, and their wives, their esposas. And they talked about that, and how they missed their wives and children so much. That had to be really rough. And the harvest season here was, I'm gonna say…I only worked two and a half months because I was going to high school, but I really think the harvest season was more like April, May, June, July, August, September, maybe October. So they were here for six, seven months. And to be away from family…I know, when I was in the military, when I got drafted in the army and I went away, it was tough being away. And I didn't have children, just my mom and dad and my brothers and sisters. So, I suspect that that was probably the most difficult of all the things. The conditions, at least in my environment, when I was there, were good, livable conditions. I think the condition of being away from the family had to be really tough.

KN: Do you think that could be one of the reasons why they took you under their wing?

FD: Yeah! I was like their…like their cousins, I guess, their small cousins. Yeah. Maybe that was it. I never really thought about that. But, when I think about it, of course! You know, we were the only younger people they were getting exposed to. And, we liked them, and they liked us. And that was the neat thing.

KN: So it was a good relationship for both sides.

FD: Yeah. Well, I think we got the bulk of the deal, because our experience…All four of us, really liked our guys, our crews. They were like uncles to us. And, uh, once in a while we'd go to work in somebody else's field, and maybe there'd be other crews. And the other crews didn't have local high school kids on the crews. And so, they would start picking on us, or, uh, throwing dirt clods at us, or something along…or obscene gestures. And our crew would step in and protect us every time. It was kinda neat, we were like a family. So I still get, you know, feel good things…when I think about it, it makes me feel good.

KN: That's great! Are there any other final reflections that you have?

FD: Well, I sure would like to see, uh, some sort of, uh, uncovering of this history while we still have the Braceros alive. They're getting older. I saw the fellows today. I was a youngster when they were Braceros. These guys were thirty, forty years old when I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. And, I'm almost sixty now, so I'd say we better get the history down. I'd like to see it translate in some way into California history books. It is, you know…half a page or something, so people know about the culture, and the Mexican

heritage here. As California becomes more blended, between a variety of different ethnic cultures, I'd like to see more and more of the history of the Mexican culture play into the schools. And so, I'm hoping maybe something like this will help play into that.

KN: What did you think of the overall presentation? Anything that needs to be added, that needs to be missing? It seems…

FD: Yeah. I think, we're just scratching the surface right now, in terms of the young people who are doing the research and so forth. But I think as you, maybe, get a half dozen, dozen Braceros in today, they talk to their buddies and…Follow-up is what I'm concerned about—getting back to Salinas a second or third time, because the word will spread. It will spread from my side of it, which is the business side or the Ag…I'm not an Ag-business person but, I know lots of people in the Ag. In fact, I've already talked to people about being open to the youngsters here that are coming for interviews. And to talk to them, and not feel threatened by them.

KN: Tell me about that. Because, you know, agriculture played a huge role. And its, you know, positive and negative, as in everything. But do you think they would be willing to talk to…

FD: They are. We've already, uh, made contact already with the President of the Grower/Shippers and explained that this should be viewed as a positive thing. And, those people that didn't treat their Braceros right, they should be worried. Those that treated them well, should be proud. They should stand forward and be proud of what they did with their crews. And those people that didn't treat them well, well maybe they ought to be exposed. But, when I explained it to him in those terms, he goes, "Great!" Because, you know, if…It will be interesting to hear what some of the Braceros said that worked for, maybe, some of the different companies. My, mine…I felt like, if you ever asked anybody that worked on it, they probably would have thought highly of the crews. But other companies, perhaps, weren't as good to their crews. And, so those people will probably run and hide. But people will probably talk about it. But, the other ones, I'm encouraging them to come out. And I believe they will. From what I understand, we're starting to set up interviews with them. So that, when they come in, the interviewers come in without bias. They come in, not looking, or having a written story in their own minds and looking for validation rather than coming in to listen to both sides of the story, and then formulate. So I believe that's what's going to happen. So I'm hoping that the crews will come back two or three times, and you'll see more of a groundswell of information. And then, more information, better quality information, translates to, uh, I think, into the books, the history books, and maybe the curricula in California, the high school curricula.

KN: Do you think that if we do come back, that more agriculture people will be able…it will enable us to interview them?

FD: If their experience was a fair experience in the interview processes, I think you'll see them lining up.

KN: Do you think they would prefer to see questions before…or, do you think…? How do we get them to the table, is my, I guess, should be my question.

FD: Well, people like myself can help in that regard. I know the owners of all the companies. I grew up with most of them. And these are, uh…Their fathers would have been the owners, or at least the foreman or the bosses then, back in the late 1950s, early 1960s. Perhaps, some of them, their grandfathers. And, uh, I think if you talk to them, a lot of people thought that the Bracero Program was a good program, for both sides—both good for the fellows coming from Mexico, and good for them. Even the ones that are out there, that perhaps weren't as good in treating their people well, looked at the Bracero Program as, at least, good for them. And shame on them if they weren't good for the Braceros. I think you'll find that, as you start to interview people, you'll get a feel for that. And maybe I'm…Maybe there weren't problems out there, I'm just guessing, perhaps, that there were, not even being exposed to it.

KN: Any final reflections that you have?

FD: Well, I have very fond feelings…I hated working in the fields. I mean, it was, uh, it was honest work, but I've never, ever…I mean, I've worked on crews, the forestry crews, making trails, hiking trails—that work was a piece of cake compared to working in the fields, on the harvesting crews. It was hard work. So, I have a high regard for those that did it, and a high regard for the culture of the men I worked with—the family culture, the religious culture, the love for the children, and just the good people that they were. So, that's kind of my overview of it. And that's why I'm here to talk about it, to bring that up from a different perspective.

KN: The hard work, what do you think you learned from…?

FD: Well, I'm sure my dad thought that I wasn't applying myself well enough in high school at the time. Which, of course, he was right. So I came back, started studying harder, I was in athletics. And, uh, started studying harder, and went on to University, and came out….I think what he really was showing me was, uh, my family were laborers in a lot of ways—my mom certainly was, and my dad, although he had a white collar job, he didn't make very much money. And so, breaking the mold of being laborers, and maybe there's something better, "I want my children to do better than I did," was my family. I think was pretty much, I don't care what culture you come from, that's every parent's dream is to hope their kids do better. And that was what my dad was pushing me…He wouldn't allow me to work in a grocery store. He wanted me to work in the fields, so I could learn what hard labor means. And I think, you know, now I look back…he never told me this…but I think what he wanted me to do, was also to understand, there are other cultures out there that are different than ours, and to learn from that.

KN: Did you?

FD: Yeah, of course.

KN: Now, how do you pass this lesson on to your children?

FD: Well, I don't know. That's a great question. I suspect by communicating. I look at my children now as being, uh, pampered. They will be second generation, uh, people of means. But, I'm sure my daughter's got it because she's been to Mexico three times on a mission program with our church, and Jamaica once, doing mission work with Spanish-speaking families. She and I have talked long and hard about it. My son doesn't seem to get a grip on it. He's a little bit like I was before my dad put me in the fields. He just, uh, doesn't see it. He doesn't, hasn't been exposed. My daughter certainly has. She's seventeen, just turned eighteen last week. She's got it.

KN: Wow. At a very young age.

FD: Yeah.

KN: Thank you, very much.

FD: You're welcome, Kristine.