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Interview no. 1588

Wonda Lou Wonicar

Norma Emison

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

Interviewee: Wonda Lou Wonicar/Norma Emison

Interviewer: _____

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Lqpgudqtq."AM0

Date of Interview: September 25

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1588

Transcriber< _____

Born Caraway ARK Oct 10 1939. Many family farms. Parents farmed. Went to school in Caroway grades 1-4-5-12. During school year had to chop and pick cotton. Split school term. Father employed Mexicans during 50's. Formed an association and one man would go to the border and bring large number back on Murphy farm approx. 25. Would fix up houses accommodation for them. Farm owner would do this. Mexicans were a great help on the farm. Doesn't remember other than Mexicans being contracted to the farm. Norma worked at a store in Caraway. Mexicans would buy good such as clothes etc. to take back to Mexico. Communication some Spanish- some hand signals.

Length of interview 30 minutes

Length of Transcript 11 pages

Name of Interviewee: Wonda Lou Wonicar

Date of Interview: September 25

Name of Interviewer:

Interviewer: This is an interview with Wonda Lou Wonicar on the 25th of September in Jonesboro, Arkansas. The interviewer is Sam Haskin. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project and part of the **Emerson** family in a series of interviews. First of all, when were you born?

WW: May 10, 1944.

Interviewer: And where you born?

WW: Caraway, Arkansas.

Interviewer: How far is Caraway, Arkansas from Jonesboro, which is the **[inaudible]**?

WW: Approximately 30 miles.

Interviewer: Okay and you have brothers and sisters?

WW: Yes. I have two older sisters, one older brother that is deceased, and one younger brother.

Interviewer: And your parents, what did they do?

WW: They farmed.

Interviewer: How much land do you recall them having?

WW: Oh, they started – I can remember they had a couple of 40s is what my dad would call it, and then, he increased his holding in, I think, probably close to 1,000 acres, I think, at one time.

Interviewer: And as a young girl growing up in the '50s when your dad farmed, did you have to work on the farm?

WW: I was the youngest, and I didn't work on the farm as much as my older siblings.

Interviewer: Why not? Why not?

WW: Well, because I was the youngest and I was spoiled probably, but I would work in the house. I did work some on the farm, but not as much as my older siblings.

Interviewer: Did you pick cotton?

WW: Yes.

Interviewer: How much would you pick as a person? What would be a good day's picking?

WW: I don't remember picking all day very many times. Now, I could pick 100 pounds. It was probably about the most I ever remember picking.

Interviewer: Did your father pay you for what you picked?

WW: I don't remember us ever getting paid to pick.

Interviewer: Really? Where did you go to school?

WW: In Caraway, Central High School.

Interviewer: Grades 1 through 12?

WW: Yes.

Interviewer: And when did you graduate?

WW: In 1962.

Interviewer: Okay, and what did you do when you got out of school?

WW: I kept books at a lumber company, and then, I moved to Memphis to work for Holiday Inns in the home office.

Interviewer: Back in the 1950s, you were a young girl at your father's farm. Your father starts to bring in some Mexican labor. How well do you recall the Mexican labor coming in? What were they like?

WW: I remember it very well because it was very – oh, I guess I was younger. I think I was probably eight, something like that, when we first got – I remember, I think, we had 19 the first year, and oh, I remember anticipating them coming and them preparing the house for them to live in and –

Interviewer: How did the Mexicans treat your family and perhaps you yourself as the youngest?

WW: They were very sweet. I just – they were very – I can remember their smile and just – we were raised in a Christian family and we had no blacks in our community, and we were taught to respect, to not have prejudice, and I think that made an influence on the way we accepted them as much as anything.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of interaction between yourself, your brothers, and sisters with the Mexican labor? Was it encouraged or –

WW: No. No. Well, no, because we were younger, and we'd always – I think our parents were looking after our welfare as much as anything.

Interviewer: Do you remember whether the – you would perhaps get the same crew coming back each year?

WW: I don't remember the same crews coming back.

Interviewer: And how did your father get the labor?

WW: I remember them going over in to Texas to pick them up.

Interviewer: Okay and he would actually go to the border to get them?

WW: That's my understanding, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. So I **heard told** that he was perhaps also part of an association?

WW: Now, I didn't know that part of it. I was younger. So I didn't remember that part of it.

Interviewer: In conversations, I remember you saying that there was one particular Mexican that spoke English. Can you tell me about him?

WW: His name was Tony, and he was our interpreter. He was very, very nice. He had a young family in Mexico, and he wanted to stay on so bad. It just –

Interviewer: And this was the first year that you had Mexicans?

WW: Yes.

Interviewer: Why didn't he stay or did he come back to you?

WW: No, he did not come back. He wanted to stay, but Dad didn't – because we – he, I think – well, Dad told me that he – we talked about this several times, and he thought it would cause friction in the community if we brought a Mexican family to live in the community because there were no other. There was no blacks. That was my understanding. It was very sad.

Interviewer: Did you ever meet Tony's family?

WW: No, but I did see pictures of them.

Interviewer: What were they like? How many children did he have?

WW: I remember a little boy. I don't remember.

Interviewer: Okay, and so, you said your father perhaps didn't want to create friction in the community.

WW: Yes.

Interviewer: Was there a shortage of local labor?

WW: Yes.

Interviewer: So I – perhaps I'm missing something in the – if your father couldn't get local labor, then I would have thought it would have been acceptable to have had somebody in that could have worked. Would it or wouldn't it?

WW: Well, that's sort of like the black labor and Mexican labor now. I mean there's friction. It's – there may have been labor at different seasons. There may have been jobs at different seasons that these other people could have picked up on.

Interviewer: For entertainment, the free time that these people had, what did they do?

WW: I don't remember the drinking part. I do. Yes, I do, but I remember them singing. Oh, their Mexican – because we didn't live very far, and I could remember them singing, and I thought it was so pretty because they had this beautiful language, and –

Interviewer: And this would be in the evening after they finished?

WW: Um-hum.

Interviewer: Now, what about if they wanted to go into town, your father would take them?

WW: Um-hum and I do remember a lot of them walking because we really weren't that far from town, and I remember seeing some of them walking.

Interviewer: So Caraway wasn't that far, but Caraway's in Craighead County.

WW: Right.

Interviewer: Which is – I don't know. I believe it's always been a dry county.

WW: That's right.

Interviewer: What if they wanted liquor or alcohol? Where would they go?

WW: To Riverdale, Lepanto.

Interviewer: Lepanto because that's in Poinsett County.

WW: Right.

Interviewer: And do you recall how they would get to Lepanto?

WW: No. I was younger than that. I don't remember.

Interviewer: You were too young to really remember.

WW: But I do – we had a movie theater there, too.

Interviewer: In –

WW: In Caraway.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

WW: Um-hum.

Interviewer: A big theater? Little theater?

WW: Small. It would be not very large.

Interviewer: And would it show the up-to-date movies or –

WW: It will, I think. What –

Interviewer: Would you go there on a Saturday morning for the Saturday morning matinee?

WW: Saturday morning, in the early afternoon.

Interviewer: And were the Mexicans welcome into Caraway from what you can remember?

WW: I think there was mixed feelings. I do remember some of the merchants – I know the merchants made – they made a lot of money from them, but I do remember some of them not being very nice to them.

Interviewer: Do you remember in what way they weren't nice?

WW: Sharp, just –

Interviewer: Rude?

WW: Um-hum.

Interviewer: What sort of stores were in Caraway at the time?

WW: Dime store, the several grocery stores. There was a drug store, the large [inaudible] that my sister worked at. It's not very large.

Interviewer: Was there a post office?

WW: Yes, post office.

Interviewer: I know you were very young when the Mexicans were here, but do you recall how they might have sent money back to their family? As much as you tell me –

WW: I'm sure it was money orders. Um-hum, I'm sure it was money orders. I think I remember them sending money order. I know I remember them sending money back home a lot, and I'm pretty sure it's probably money orders.

Interviewer: How do – as a child, what was your impression of the dress, the way the Mexicans were dressed, when they came to you or came on in to work, and then, after they spent six weeks chopping cotton

or picking cotton, they obviously have earned some money. What were they like when they went back?

WW: Dressed very much with new clothes. They were dressed very poorly when they came, and –

Interviewer: Was there anything in particular that you recall? Perhaps they wanted to buy when they were here, perhaps a sewing machine or something to take home.

WW: I don't remember that. I don't remember what they really wanted to purchase. Well, I do remember the toys they wanted for the children, but – because most of them did have children.

Interviewer: What sort of toys were they? What type of things were –

WW: I don't remember. I don't remember.

Interviewer: You were obviously lived just a short distance from where the Mexicans lived. Do you remember what they would eat?

WW: Yes. I can smell it to this day.

Interviewer: What would they eat?

WW: Tortillas. They made these tortillas, and there's an odor that the onions and the – oh, it smells so good, and of course, Mother wouldn't let us go down and eat with them, but it just – their food smelled so good, and they would make the tortillas, and I'm sure now. I'm more familiar with that type of food, but at that time, I wasn't. I mean all I knew was they made the tortillas and all the good stuff that went in it and yeah.

Interviewer: But you were never allowed to go and try?

WW: No. No.

Interviewer: That must have been hard, but it was all men. There were no women that came with them, the Mexicans.

WW: No. No.

Interviewer: What about medical care if they were sick?

WW: I don't remember any.

Interviewer: You don't remember?

WW: Nuh, uh. I don't.

Interviewer: What would happen, though, if you were sick? What would your father do or your mother?

WW: Take us to the doctor.

Interviewer: And there doctors in Caraway.

WW: Off and on. Most of the time there were. Um-hum.

Interviewer: So you would think that they would treat the Mexicans if it was needed?

WW: Sure. Sure. They'd take them to the doctor. Um-hum.

Interviewer: Do you have any thoughts?

Female: Did – this is Maria **Losa**. Did the Braceros ever try to talk to girls?

WW: Oh, there were some cute ones. I do remember. Of course, I was younger, and I do remember that, yeah, they were – oh yes, they'd flash their pretty smiles at the girls. Um-hum. Yeah. Of course, the girls weren't able to associate with them, any that I knew of, but oh, yeah, there were some cutes.

Female: How did you actually start a friendship with Tony?

WW: Oh, because he was so friendly, and he was the one that always interpreted, and – because we had more interaction with him.

Female: And so, what would you guys talk about? Did he ask you questions about the town or –

WW: Mostly, he talked about his family. Yeah.

Female: Do you remember what his biggest, I would say, what his biggest worries or concerns were when he talked about his family?

WW: Wanted to bring them to the U.S.

Female: He wanted to bring them to the U.S.

WW: Oh, yes. Very much so.

Female: Why do you think that is?

WW: To have a better life for them than he could provide for them in Mexico.

Female: And in some way, do you feel like your friendship with Tony at that time influenced the way you saw the other men?

WW: Sure. You had more empathy for them.

Female: Did Tony ever describe his home?

WW: I don't remember him ever describing his home.

Female: Of all of the Braceros, other than the fact that you could have conversations with him, why do you think that he stands out the most in your mind?

WW: Because I felt so sorry for him because he couldn't stay, and I remember him crying when he left.

Female: When he left, how did he leave? You were describing this moment of seeing him crying. What was going on?

WW: Well, they were leaving in the truck with the other men.

Female: They pack him up with everyone else, and **[inaudible]**.

WW: Yes.

Female: And after they pack them up, did they – where did they drive them to?

WW: They went directly to the border, I guess.

Female: Did you ever receive any kind of – or your father, you, your family, any kind of letters from any of these men?

WW: I believe he got some letters from Tony.

Female: So he got letters from Tony?

WW: Um-hum. I remember, yeah.

Female: And what did these letters say?

WW: Just asking for him to bring his family back to the U.S.

Female: And you talked a little bit about why your father was conflicted about bringing Tony.

WW: Can I tell you an incident that happened? All of these men were young. They miss their family. They miss their spouses, and one incident that happened at the theater, the afternoon my sister goes in [inaudible]. My cousin and I, we were eight and nine, I believe, and we were watching the Saturday afternoon matinee. And we felt this heavy breathing behind us, and then, I felt a hand coming up under my skirt, and it was one of the Mexicans. And I don't know if anything else happened to anyone else, but that was this – I think there was a little fear there because the difference in –

Female: When that happened to you, did you jump out?

WW: I jumped up and left.

Female: Did you tell any adults?

WW: No.

Female: Why didn't you tell anyone?

WW: Didn't want to get him into trouble.

Female: Even after that incident? I should ask, well, did that incident change the way you saw these men?

WW: No. I don't think really. No.

Female: And it didn't make you weary or afraid of them?

WW: It could have at the time, but in the big picture, it didn't.

Female: And after the men left and were gone, did you feel like something was missing in the community or did you feel like things were back to normal?

WW: I think it didn't take long for things to get back to normal.

Female: Do you feel like these men changed anything about your life or the life of people in your community in Caraway?

WW: I think it did. I think it changed the way that we looked at other people because we were so isolated and just no lives, no – it – there’s other people out there that have different situations than we do, and I think we had more empathy and more understanding. That’s the way I felt, and I think it’s the community as a whole. I think that it changed them.

Female: Do you remember anything else about or any other situations or instances where things happened out of the ordinary while the men were here?

WW: I don’t remember anything else.

Female: Well, thank you very much.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 21 minutes

DRAFT