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Interview no. 1589

Bill Stone

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

Interviewee: Bill Stone

Interviewer: Brady Banta

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Bay, Arkansas

Date of Interview: September 26, 2008

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Transcript No.: 1589

Transcriber / Summary: _____

Discusses using Mexican labor from 1954 to 1959 to pick cotton. Difficulties with Labor Department inspectors prompts family to discontinue using Mexican labor and to purchase cotton picker. Discusses sending money home for the Mexicans

Length of Interview 44 minutes

Length of Transcript 16 pages

Name of Interviewee: Bill Stone
Date of Interview: September 26, 2008
Name of Interviewer: Brady Banta

All right. We got it going here. There we go. We are here today. My name is Brady Banta, interviewing Mr. Bill Stone. It is September 26, 2008, and we are at Mr. Stone's home in Bay, Arkansas. I am going to be tape recording our conversation for the Bracero History Project. You are aware that I am tape recording it and I have your permission to do so.

BS: Yeah.

BB: All right, sir. Thank you. Mr. Stone, to get this started, if you would, tell me a little bit about your background. Where and when were you born? Where did you grow up and how did you get your start in farming, and have you always been in farming?

BS: I've always been in farming. I was born January 7, 1923. My daddy was a farmer and I grew up farming. He just farmed. See, I grew up in the '30s. You've heard about them. I grew up in the '30s and everybody that lived on a farm worked. From the time you were five or six years old, you went to the field and chopped cotton and picked cotton and done whatever they wanted us to do. There was no question about whether or not you were going to work or not. Everybody worked.

So that's the way I grew up. I grew up farming. My daddy was farming with a pair of mules and we just had ten acres of cotton, but we grew hogs and cows, chickens, and that's the way I grew up. My daddy was born in 1900.

BB: Now, when you were growing up, was your father farming here in the vicinity of Bay?

BS: Yeah, just on this same ditch, up about a couple of miles. We've been on this ditch – his parents moved here in 1917 and they moved on this same ditch right here in 1917. We don't own that farm that they owned, but he bought this in 1945. Yeah, 1945 and I bought it from him in 1975. But he just farmed and I grew up farming.

BB: And basically, when you finished school, you just went into farming with him, working for him or as a partner with him, right?

BS: Yeah.

BB: You grew primarily cotton.

BS: Oh, yeah. Back in them times, we just had small allotments, one row of corn and hay. You had to have something to feed the mules and the cows and hogs. I tell you it wasn't easy to make a living.

BB: When you father bought this farm in 1945, had the land all been cleared?

BS: This land was cleared. The land that he first bought was in the woods. We had to clear it.

BB: Did you participate in the clearing of that land?

BS: Oh, yeah.

BB: Can you tell me just a little bit about how you did that?

BS: He bought 40 acres in the woods in, I think, '36. He borrowed \$400.00 from his daddy to buy that 40 acres. And he went back there and went to clearing with a crosscut saw and a chopping axe and a cutter blade, and that's the way he cleared it. He bought one 40 and then in a year or two, he bought another one, and he went on up to buying five. Yeah, he bought five 40s over there.

And wasn't much of it cleared. Just about – well, there was some of it cleared, but there wasn't much cleared. A lot of people had bought them 40s and cleared a little bit of them and they got a chance to sell out and leave and he bought them out, one 40 at a time just scattered around. And that's where he got started.

BB: But when he bought this, had this been part of a corporate land that had been cleared or he bought it from another farmer?

BS: Bought it from a loan company. This 40 right here, about 30 acres of it hadn't been farmed in years. It grew up in Bermuda grass. There were about 10 acres on the far side. This had been a farm for years. I don't know if you can find the family that owned it. I don't know that much about any of it, but that 40 there.

And when the war broke out and they started building airports, they dug the Bermuda grass off this and hauled it to Walnut Ridge, beside that Walnut Ridge Airport. You've heard of things like that? Well, they dug the Bermuda grass off that to sod that airport at Walnut Ridge.

And then they started farming. It had been farmed one year when Daddy bought it. They farmed it, and I think they planted it in squash then hauled squash to Memphis to market.

BB: So it was basically a truck farm that first year.

BS: Yeah. But he bought it in 1945 and we've been farming it ever since.

BB: From that start of roughly 100 acres, how big did the operation eventually grow to be?

BS: My daddy, he just had about 600 acres. Yeah, 600 acres and I bought a block of land in 1950, 65 acres for \$3,000.00. There was about 15 acres of it cleared and I've still got it. I own a little over 400 acres.

And then my daddy left – I got three sisters, so we got 100 acres apiece. We made a partnership out of it and we've got a little over 400 acres and it's in a partnership with me and my three sisters.

BB: When did you and your father first use Mexican migrant labor and what prompted you to make the decision to contract for the Mexican migrant labor?

BS: Well, there wasn't enough labor and there wasn't enough labor around here to harvest the cotton. In 1952, we got Mexican labor to come in here and pick our cotton.

BB: So you had a bigger allotment than you could physically handle yourself.

BS: That's right.

BB: Did you – go ahead.

BS: The first bunch we got, of course, we were just as green as anybody could be, and they were, too, except one. One of them had been taught in the soup line during the '30s in the Depression and he could speak a little English. He got caught in the soup line, I think, in Detroit and they hauled him back to Mexico. And he was over here for the first time since back in the '30s and he could speak a little English, and we got by with him pretty good.

They were glad to get a job. When they got here, we gave them a number and a \$5.00 bill, and we took them to the grocery store.

They bought a few groceries and the next morning, they sent what they had left to Mexico. They said their family was hungry and they needed what little money they could get to feed their family back in Mexico.

Now, that's pretty curious. That's pretty serious for them people as well as us. But he could speak a little English and we got by pretty good.

BB: That first year, I mean roughly how many Mexicans did you have?

BS: I think there was 24. Us and one more farmer went together and got them together. I don't remember acres he had and how many we had, but I think we got 24.

BB: How did you house them?

BS: Well, we had a farmhouse and we built bunk beds, two-by-fours, and [inaudible], and gave them a blanket and a bed and a mattress and a pillow. And the way I remember it, a two-burner kerosene stove. And they cooked their own food and they ate tortillas and beans and chilies.

BB: Now, did you house – you and the other farmer – did you house them altogether?

BS: No, we had two houses.

BB: Two houses. Were these just old tenant houses?

BS: Yeah.

BB: And were they adjacent to your house or were they just out in the field?

BS: No, they were out in the field. We had to haul them to the cotton field. We had to pick them with a ton and a half truck and haul them to the cotton field. I weighed their cotton for them. They were hauled in here in an open top truck all the way from Mexico, the first loads. Later in years, they got to haul them in buses. But them first loads came in here in open top trucks all the way from the border.

BB: Now, who did you make arrangements with, or you and your father make arrangements with to get these 24 laborers?

BS: Well, I don't really know. I had an uncle in a cotton gin business over close to Caraway and that group of people over there kind of formed a **social session** and we got them through there.

BB: So it was run through one of the gins in there.

BS: Yeah.

BB: All right. That's something I've run into before. They would work for you standard five and a half day week?

BS: No, they wanted to work seven days a week. They wanted to go to the field early and stay late and they wanted to work seven days a week. We didn't work but six days a week, but they wanted to work seven. If we were close to their house, they might go pick a sack full on Sunday and then they'd have a sack full to start on Monday morning.

They were curious people. I'll tell you a good story on them. We parked a wagon on one end of the field and ordinary people would go to the other end and start and pick toward the wagon. Mexican's wouldn't do that. They'd start at the wagon, pick that way, and then carry it back.

We started picking in this field here one time. I unloaded them on the other end of the field. Boy, they got out and started picking. Daddy come by after a while. They'd picked up the field a little ways and parked the wagon down here on this side and they picked their sacks up and came to this end and picked back. I couldn't get them to pick toward the wagon. They would pick from the start of the wagon and go a little way and then carry it.

I saw a little old Mexican, who didn't even weight 140 pounds, carry a 100 pounds of cotton from the other end all the way back here to the wagon. You'd give him a rope and he'd hang his weighing sack on the scales and you'd weigh him, and he'd climb the ladder and carry it up on the wagon and empty it.

And they wouldn't help each other get a sack in the wagon. They wouldn't help each other. They'd laugh at each other, but they wouldn't start at the other end and pick toward the wagon. You couldn't get them to. I thought I had them tricked to where they would and they would not go to the other end and pick toward the wagon. They started here and picked that way. I don't know why. I never could figure out why. Of course, in Mexico, they might've made them do that. I don't know.

BB: The men that you would hire in these years, when they would arrive here – well, first off, did you hire them just to pick or did you hire a crew to chop also?

BS: We didn't hire crews to chop. We just kept them through the picking season.

BB: So they would arrive here mid-September?

BS: Yeah, about the 20th or 25th of September and most of the time, they were boarding them out of here by December 1. Sometimes, they'd stay a little later. They were just here on the contract for so long. I don't remember how long, about three months, I guess.

BB: When these men would arrive here, were these people – did they know how to pick cotton or did you have to teach them how to pick cotton?

BS: Well, I'm sure there was some of them that knew how to pick cotton and they taught each other. They taught each other. They'd help each other a little bit, but they didn't help each other much.

BB: Now, you said you first started using the Mexican laborers in 1952. What was the last year that you used them?

BS: '59.

BB: 1959. And you told me in 1952 that you and a neighbor went together and contracted for roughly 24. Did you contract – for each of those seven years after that, did you contract for roughly the same number or did the number grow?

BS: Well, we rented different acreages and it grew. I don't remember, but there were a few years that we had more than 24. I don't remember how many.

BB: Okay, but it never got to be like 100 or something like that?

BS: Oh, no. No.

BB: Did you ever have any trouble with them as workers?

BS: Well, I had one get in a load of trouble.

BB: What kind of trouble was this?

BS: I didn't understand it. The border patrol said he was just a communist.

BB: So they came here and got him and took him. The border patrol came here and got him and took him away.

BS: They said he was a communist. They could tell. They walked up into 24 – 25 Mexicans and they could pick him out, the border patrol.

BB: Now, was this from the border patrol office that was over around Blytheville?

BS: I'm sure it was.

BB: So it wasn't necessarily that you had a problem with him, but the government had a problem with him for some reason, so they got him and removed him.

BS: Yeah. I'll tell you another story about one. A pretty big operator over here had a cotton gin and he got a load in to pick his cotton and pick his customer's cotton. He was trying to get one of them to pick. Go to work, go to work, go to work. He says, "Mister." He says, "In my country, I'm a lot bigger than you are." He says, "I just come for the trip."

I'll give you a cup of coffee. I got a cup of coffee.

BB: No, I'm good. I'm good.

BS: But he says, "I just come for the trip, wanted to see the country. Didn't cost me nothing."

BB: Did they send him back?

BS: Well, I don't remember that part. I think he demanded that he go back. He didn't want to pick cotton.

BB: That's just funny.

BS: But he said in his country, he said, "I'm a lot bigger than you are in my country. I don't have to pick. I got plenty of people that work for me." He said, "I just liked the trip over here."

BB: You mentioned in our brief conversation before we went on tape, or maybe it was only first on tape, that that first group that you – I think it was when we were on tape. But that first group you got here in 1952, you got them here, and you gave each one of them a \$5.00 bill, and you took them into town so they could buy some groceries. And they bought what they wanted at the store and then wanted to make arrangements to send the rest of their money back to Mexico.

BS: To Mexico.

BB: Can you describe how they did that? How did they send their money back home?

BS: They fixed it up for me and I bought them a money order and they mailed it. They had the address and everything on it and I bought them a money order and sent it back in a money order.

BB: Now, was this something that then subsequently, you did most weeks?

BS: Yeah, most of the weeks, they sent a portion of their paycheck home.

BB: I'm assuming you and your father paid them once a week, on Saturday or whenever it was, and you paid them in cash. And then they would give you back a portion of it to take in to get a money order to send to Mexico.

BS: Yeah.

BB: And did most of them do this?

BS: Yeah, I guess all of them did.

BB: Can you give me any sense of – well, how much money – on a good week, how much money would one of these individuals make, and how much would he send home?

BS: Well, I think the first year, I think, we were paying them \$2.50 a hundred to pick. And most of them could pick 200 pounds. That would be \$5.00 a day, worked six days; that would be \$30.00. And they would send probably \$25.00 of it home. They sent nearly all of it home for the first week or two and then they'd send a little less. They bought a lot of clothes and took back with them.

BB: Tell me what – because I’m assuming that once a week, you would have to take them into Bay or Trumann or someplace.

BS: Yep, took them to Bay.

BB: Took them to Bay because they would need to buy their groceries and whatever. So tell me what it was like when you took them into Bay on, I’m assuming, Saturday afternoon. What was it like because I’m assuming you and everybody else was coming to town at the same time?

BS: They’d be full of Mexicans and of course, they’d visit with each other and some of them knew each other. And they’d visit and talk a whole lot. They’d buy their groceries and they were ready to go home. But they bought a lot of clothes. They have pretty big families and I guess what clothes they bought over here were better than it was in Mexico. They’d buy them some blue jeans, overalls, and they bought a lot of old tires. They made their shoes. They made themselves out of car tires. They’d cut them car tires up in pieces and take them home with them.

They bought pedals, Singer sewing machines. They bought a lot of things like that and took it home with them. And sometimes they tried to get a gun home. I don’t know whether they ever got a gun home or not, but they’d get them a bucket, put lard in it, and drop their gun down in that lard. I don’t know whether the border patrol found them all or not, but they tried to get home with a gun.

BB: How would the business people in town be able to communicate with them? Did they hire interpreters or did they just make do? Kind of like signing with each other.

BS: Them boys could figure – they knew what they were paying for everything and they knew what money was worth. They could figure it. I don’t know whether anybody tried to beat them or not, but they wouldn’t get by with much of it if they did.

BB: Can you tell me – this program that provided these laborers was a program that was based on an agreement between the Mexican government and the American government, and a system had been set up where the American, I think it was Labor Department, would send out inspectors. Did you have any experiences with the inspectors coming and if so, can you tell me about that?

BS: Well, all I remember about them is when they were going back home, they’d come and check your books out. And they always,

two or three times in a row, the last two or three years, they always found something wrong. We got to paying them more. Just like everything else, it was going up. But you couldn't satisfy that government man. He wanted you to quit using them. He was from the Labor Department and he wanted them to quit coming over here.

And he'd rip you off. We didn't beat them out of nothing. We paid them everything we were supposed to pay them and done more for them than we were supposed to. But he'd always find something wrong.

BB: Was he finding something wrong with your books or finding something wrong with the housing or the bedding or whatever?

BS: I think it must have been the books because I don't think he went to the houses and checked them out. I don't know. I never could figure it out, but that time, in 1959, whenever they figured it out, they charged my daddy a pretty big pile. I don't remember how much. He said we won't ever have any more business with you. You mark this down. I remember him pointing his finger at him and "you can mark this down. Me and you won't ever have to do anymore business together. This is our last time." And that's when I bought a cotton picker. He said, "Son, you'll have to buy a cotton picker."

And what I told you a while ago is not on that tape is it?

BB: No. Just go ahead and relate that if you would.

BS: He said, "Son, you'll have to buy a cotton picker. I'm too old." And I bought a two-row International cotton picker and I had 125 – 130 acres of land and a tractor and equipment and an automobile, and that cotton picker cost more than everything I had put together. And me and Daddy had 160 acres of cotton and we picked it with that cotton picker. It made us pay income tax. We didn't have to keep up with Mexicans. We didn't have to send any money to Mexico. And we finally got that cotton picker paid for.

BB: When you bought your cotton picker, there probably were other people around who had cotton pickers, but there weren't a whole lot of them.

BS: No, there wasn't. I bought the only two-row picker that was in this big community.

BB: Where did you have to go to buy it?

BS: Trumann. They had a dealer in Trumann. They had a John Deere dealer and an International dealer, both at Trumann. I bought a red one. I bought an International. It cost \$17,000.00.

BB: In 1959?

BS: Yeah.

BB: That's a pretty good piece of money.

BS: It was then. It was then. It's different today.

BB: How long did it take you to pay that off?

BS: Well, the way I remember it, I paid on it two years and then I got my daddy's name off that note. So I guess it took me about three years. By that time, I was ready to trade. I had to trade it off and get a new one. But we made it.

BB: If you – and correct me if I'm wrong – when your father said, "I've had enough," and informed you that you've got to go buy a cotton picker, and you were, if not the first, one of the first in this area to purchase a cotton picker –

BS: The first two-row cotton picker.

BB: The first two-row cotton picker. Roughly, how many years after that was it that everybody had mechanized?

BS: Well, it was more than you'd think. It was, well, it was probably six or eight years. There'd be one or two buying one every year. Some of them bought a one row; some of them bought a two row, according to how much they were farming. But they were still getting Mexicans for, well, five or six years.

BB: Other than the fact that it changed, I guess, the way of life here that you didn't have to have these hired laborers that you had to manage and sustain for 8 – 10 weeks every fall, was there any kind of a philosophical difference in the approach to the way that you farmed when you had a cotton picker and when you didn't have a cotton picker?

BS: Yeah, you needed to keep it clean. You didn't want grass in your cotton samples. You had to keep the grass out of your cotton. We

put up fences and bought gates. Geese would eat the grass out of the cotton.

BB: Tell me about that.

BS: Well, you had to put down a pump, to pump water for them, had to keep them watered, and you'd feed them a little bit of corn. They'd get the grass out of the cotton. They done a good job.

BB: Okay. If you had – let's say that by the time you bought that cotton picker, you and your father had 160 acres of cotton. How many geese do you have to have to keep the grass out of 160 acres of cotton?

BS: I don't remember. I don't know. Best I remember about 40 head.

BB: About 40, okay. And you just moved them from field to field.

BS: Yeah, you had to put up a fence. You had to water them and feed them, and sometimes the dogs would get in them and kill a few of them. But they'd get the grass out pretty good.

I think years later that if we would have known to use sheep, that the sheep would have eaten the weeds and the grass both and not bothered the cotton. But we didn't figure that out until most of it had quit using stuff like that. But I think if it was to do over, we'd probably use sheep. They'd eat the weeds and the grass both and trim the bushes out of the fencerows, too.

BB: From previous interview I conducted several years ago, a gentleman told me that the hardest thing he had to overcome when he made the decision to go from handpicking cotton to using a cotton picker was that, at the end of the season, when they'd finished handpicking, you would look at the cotton field and you wouldn't see any white. And when you used the cotton picker, you always saw some white. It took him a while to get over that. Did you have any kind of transition like that?

BS: When we started picking right out there, my daddy, if he had a pick sack, he'd pick up the cotton that was left. It was a big deal. And he come up there and he said, "Son, there ain't no cotton left out there." He said he picked up maybe two pounds on two rows. He said there ain't no cotton left out there. I believe you can pick this cotton. And he quit going to the field.

And this ditch dump out here was a near ditch dump and it was hard to get up on with a cotton picker. Them cotton pickers had a little wheel about that wide on the back and it was hard to turn. He hired some hands and handpicked it. That land on that ditch dump, when he got it jammed, he said that's the last bale of cotton I'll ever handpick because it cost me more than I got out of it. So we don't handpick no more. He said what that picker don't pick we're just not going to worry about it.

But he picked up two rows of cotton and he said before we bought that picker, we picked a one-row picker right out here, picked a few rows, and I don't remember how much it was, but we waited around a week or two and got some hand pickers to pick it. They didn't pick anymore than that cotton picker did. After waiting a few days to get some hands, why, he said, "Son, we picked as much with that picker as we're picking with these hand pickers." But we done backed out of buying that cotton picker.

BB: You've told me about the difficulties you had with the inspectors from the Labor Department. During any of that period, from 1952 to 1958, do you remember having any problems with the laborers themselves?

BS: No. We just didn't have no trouble with them. They'd just go out there and pick cotton. Really, they, like I told you, they liked you because they had a job. You let them work and you'd pay them. They were glad to get paid. And they sent most of it all to Mexico. They didn't spend much here. They'd buy beans and make tortillas and that was about all they ate.

BB: When they had their – I guess when they had the day off on Sunday because you didn't take them to the field, what did they do?

BS: They washed and cleaned everything up, and washed their clothes. They took a bath, whatever. They piddled around the house, cleaning up. One time, I let them drive the truck. I had one that could drive and I let them drive the truck. I didn't see him, but I heard he went to Trumann.

BB: Going to Trumann, for the transcriber here, Bay is in a dry county and Trumann's in a wet county, so he went to Trumann.

BS: But we got by with it. We didn't pick them up. They got back home. I don't know how scared they got, but they got back home. I'll tell you another one. We had one that hurt his back. Some of

them were about as well educated as I was and I let him be the weigh boy. Suited him just fine. And it come getting time to go home and he began wanting to go home and I wasn't ready for him to go. He says I need to go home and he began telling me what all he had to do when he got home. He had corn. He had some beans. I think he said he had eight head of mules. So he was a pretty big farmer back home.

And I come up short that year. And I said well, how about me going down there and living with you and working for you this winter? Okay, okay. How much will you pay me? He said \$.60 a day. I said I don't believe I'll go. But he said he'd pay me \$.60 a day.

BB: So your impression was that was the prevailing wage down there and you're paying them \$2.50 a hundred, so they're going to make \$5.00, \$7.50 a day here.

BS: Yeah, they'd pay me \$.60 if I'd go down there and work for him. He said you can go work for me this winter and I'll pay you \$.60 a day. I said I don't believe I'll go.

BB: Well, do you have any other memories or stories that you'd like to tell us that my questions haven't prompted you to relate to us?

BS: Well, I reckon I've pretty well told you what I know.

BB: All right, sir. I'm going to –

[Audio Restarted]

BB: Okay, we're back on again.

BS: We went to Memphis and had a meeting with the Labor Department. And the farmers were going up and talking and telling all this good stuff, and I remember one particular farmer got up and told the man, he said – I think he had 18 or 20 two-row tractors. Had to have a driver for every one of them. Told how many people he was working and all that good stuff. After a while, the Labor Department had a man get up. Instead of paying them \$2.50 a hundred, the Labor Department ought to be paying them \$4.00 a hundred, and he just kept – and of course, the farmers, they just hooted. You can imagine farmers hooting him around.

And this old, big dude from the Labor Department got up and he says, now, we've sat here and listened to you farmers cry and complain, and you're going to sit here and listen to him. But they told that fella if you do what you say you're going to do, I don't need these people. They'll be yours. You'll take them somewhere else because I won't need them.

Well, the farmer was right. We got rid of that labor business. There were areas that the black people – farmers used a lot of them. They had a lot of them and they used them. Now, what they paid them then I don't know. We didn't use them. We didn't use very many. I never did use them, black people. One time I had a little busload out of Memphis come chop cotton for me a day or two, but we just didn't use them. We used local people and managed to get by.

But when they were using that many, they just get rid of them. I had a cousin that moved down to **Barling** in 1964 and there were just shacks all around down there, full of them, full of black people. And he got rid of all of them. They can get by without them. Them local people didn't think they could, but when somebody else moved in, they got found out. They run them all off. They filled up Chicago and a lot of other places.

Whether it was good or bad, I ain't got the answer for it. It changed things. It changed a lot of things. And whether it was right or wrong, I don't know. I'm sure the black people were mistreated. I know they was way back when, but during that time, I don't know whether they were or not. I don't know. I just don't know.

BB: Well, when they mechanized around here, the amount of labor they needed around here just – the bottom fell out of it. They didn't need them anymore.

BS: Yeah. And when the prices went up, the labor prices went up, they managed to skip by on a lot less labor. A lot bigger tractors need less help. Now, where all they went and what all they done, I don't know. But they left.

BB: And I guess that started a – I don't know if you want to call it a vicious cycle, but it started a cycle because once you had to have – if you were going to work with fewer people, you had to have bigger equipment, and to make the bigger equipment pay, you had to farm more land. So the smaller farmer starts getting squeezed out because he can't afford the bigger equipment.

BS: Well, back then, there was a house on very 40 acres. Some of them had two houses. Now, you can't hardly find a house out in the country. School buses ran all over this country and just filled up, and now, they run all over the country and don't hardly get anybody.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 44 minutes

DRAFT