

9-24-2008

Interview no. 1590

Don Stallings

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Don Stallings by Brady Banta, 2008, "Interview no. 1590," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Don Stallings

Interviewer: Brady Banta

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Blytheville, AR.

Date of Interview: September 24, 2008

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Transcript No.: 1590

Transcriber: GMR Transcriptions

Father farmer 2000 acres of cotton and owned/operated a gin at Yarrow, AR. From 1963, his father contracted for 300 bracero laborers. Constructional and maintains the Mexican *barrotes* on his farm. Contracted with a Texas Mexican Jesus Salinas to provide andmanage all of the laborers.

Length of Interview 41 minutes

Length of Transcript 18 pages

Name of Interviewee: Don Stallings
Date of Interview: September 24, 2008
Name of Interviewer: Brady Banta

BB: This is Brady Banta, and I'll turn the volume down on this a little bit. Yeah, that's a little better. Don't want to deafen myself.

I am Brady Banta. It is September 24, 2008. I am here with Mr. Don Stallings and we are in Blytheville, Arkansas, conducting our interview for the Bracero Oral History Project.

Mr. Stallings, you are aware of the fact that I am tape-recording this conversation and I have your permission to do so, is that correct?

DS: Yes.

BB: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Now, if you would, sir, tell me a little bit about your background, who you are, where you were born, when you were born, something about your education, and your occupational history.

DS: My name is Don Stallings and I've lived in Blytheville all of my life. I have two years of college and I worked on Haynes Farm at Yarbrow, Arkansas.

BB: Haynes Farm at Yarbrow, okay. In this work and in growing up around here, you witnessed the Mexican migrant farm laborers working here in Blytheville.

DS: Yes, sir.

BB: Roughly, when is the first memory you have of these people being here to work?

DS: 1958.

BB: 1958. Can you describe to me what they were doing and what you were doing to witness this?

DS: Well, my father got 300 of them here to pick cotton. He owned a cotton gin and he had quite a bit of cotton he farmed himself. And he had 4,000 or 5,000 acres that they ginned back then and the Mexicans would pick other people's cotton, too, when they weren't picking his cotton.

And our home was approximately a half mile from what they called them Mexican barracks. They were tin and wood buildings. There were three. I remember them. Those were the living shacks. They were like over 100 feet long and they had old Army cots, is what they slept on.

And then they had a cook shack. I remember the cook shack because it had a little old propane stove in there and I'd eaten twice – I guess they were tortillas, but they were delicious because they had crew leaders and I remember one of them's name was Rudy and he introduced me – I forgot the guy's name that did the cooking, but they were delicious. I ate twice over there, them tortillas, but there's better Mexican food around here now.

BB: So they had three barracks buildings roughly 100 individuals to a building and they had a communal cook shack for the 300 men.

DS: Right.

BB: Was there one man or a segment of the crew whose job it was to cook and feed everybody else, or did they, when they came back from the field, did they cook, or do you know?

DS: It looked like to me each individual cooked his own meal.

BB: Okay, so the cook shack had to have been a pretty substantial building in and of itself for them to all come in and cook.

DS: You're right. I don't know how many could cook at one time, but I'd say, oh, probably 100 could meet in that shack and cook. But I know they had a little old propane stove set up.

BB: Okay, so would it have been something like when you would go to the park, they would have kind of a shelter house thing that had all kinds of cooking grills in it.

DS: It just had that two-burner, little, ole stove.

BB: Two-burner stove.

DS: That's all it was and each individual – then right there next to it was another two-burner, little, ole propane stove. And I don't really remember how many it was there, but on the other side, it was like two of them, two aisles of it, like a mess hall in the Army. You go down through there. I'd say it was 25 by 30 on this side

and 25 by 30 on the other side. But all of them couldn't eat at once, though.

BB: So let me get this right. In getting a picture of this cook shack, there was just two two-burner stoves or were there 25 two-burner stoves?

DS: It was 50 or 60 of them.

BB: Okay, good. So they could all come in, cook their own meal, go sit, and eat, and then another group would come in.

DS: That's the way I understood it.

BB: That's amazing. What about the barracks? What about washroom facilities and latrine facilities?

DS: I don't really remember that.

BB: Okay, all right. Now, were these barracks – was this a facility that was built specifically to house the Mexicans or was this something that was left from World War II housing German prisoners of war?

DS: It was built for them.

BB: Now, is this something that the gin built?

DS: Right.

BB: Was this an expense the gin took on itself or were there a group of farmers that came together and formed almost like a coop to do this, or do you know?

DS: I take it the gin did it itself because it was on my dad's ground where he built them. So I'd say it was him.

BB: So he owned the gin?

DS: Right.

BB: Wow. Now, he owned the gin and he had to contract for all 300 of these individuals.

DS: Yes, sir.

BB: Do you remember anything about the amount of paperwork and bookwork that he had to do to keep track of all of this?

DS: I remember they had to – it was two girls and that's all they kept up with. The Mexicans, like, they paid them every Saturday afternoon, and he had to hire two girls to keep up. They put it in a pay envelope and whatever number or something, whatever they called, and they came up there and got – they was at a pay window at the gin. I remember them being in long lines up there getting that money.

BB: How did your father get these 300 individuals to Yarbrow, Arkansas?

DS: It was like five or six crew leaders. They were from Texas, Texas Mexicans, and they could talk English. And they were all kin to each other. The head honcho, I remember his name, Jesse Salinas. He was a college graduate.

BB: He was a Texas Mexican that had businessman/entrepreneur, who had put this system together on his end and he worked the business arrangement with your father on the Arkansas end to bring his management and 300 laborers up here.

DS: I believe all the crew leaders were his kinfolks. I remember one named Manuel and one named Rudy. They were like cousins or uncles, but they were his kinfolks. And he was here all the time they were here picking cotton.

BB: Now, if I get this right, this Mr. Jesse Salinas had took care – he had done all of the recruiting – as best you know – had done all the recruiting –

DS: Right, down there.

BB: He had done all the paperwork to make sure that these people were legal and documented and everything, and he contracted with your father to bring them up here to work for your father through the gin, for however many cotton farmers were around here that did business with your father.

DS: Right.

BB: Would they be here just to pick or were they come to chop also?

DS: Now, one year, he got about 100 to chop cotton. I remember. But only one year. I don't know what year it was, but I remember some came up to chop cotton.

BB: Now, you indicated that your first memory of this arrangement that your father had with Mr. Salinas started in 1958.

DS: Right.

BB: How many years did they continue to do business this way?

DS: I believe about '63.

BB: Now, during that time span, did they — I'm sure numbers might vary from year to year, but did they employ roughly the same number of people each year, roughly 300 each year?

DS: Yeah, 250 – 300.

BB: Two hundred fifty to 300. Why did they stop after 1963?

DS: Mechanical cotton pickers began to take over, machine pickers.

BB: And each year then, of that five, six-year period, your father worked this same arrangement with Mr. Salinas.

DS: Right.

BB: Do you have any clue on how your father got hooked up with Jesse Salinas?

DS: I have no idea.

BB: This is fabulous to have that many people here working at that. Now, normally, what time would they arrive?

DS: Mid-September.

BB: And normally, how long would they stay?

DS: November 1.

BB: So they'd be here six, maybe eight weeks.

DS: Right.

BB: And then they'd all go home?

DS: Yes.

BB: That's amazing. And then they'd do the same thing next year.

DS: Right.

BB: Now, do any of these barracks buildings still stand?

DS: No. They're gone.

BB: Too bad.

DS: They're gone.

BB: Oh, well, you can always hope. How did your father, with, again, you've got 300 men and, from what you said, you've got Jesse Salinas comes himself and he brings five or six crew bosses with him. How did you manage getting the people dispersed to all the different sites because it sounds like they had to go here today and they go there tomorrow?

DS: Right. Don't ask me that. I guess they just go by the gin. If the farmer had cotton to pick and my dad wasn't using them, they'd go there.

BB: Now, you said – correct me – your dad had several thousand acres of cotton that he was farming.

DS: Right. He had between 2,000 and 3,000 acres.

BB: Two thousand and 3,000 acres, so he could keep these people busy a good amount of time himself.

DS: Yes.

BB: In a normal year, if there is such a thing, if you've got 2,000 acres of cotton, how long would it take you to hand pick that amount of cotton?

DS: Three weeks to a month is what I say.

BB: Wow. And so it's quite conceivable that these people would have picked, like you said, the 2,000 acres for your father, and then

might have picked another 1,000 – 2,000 acres combined for other people.

DS: Yes, sir.

BB: Why did your father decide to use the Mexican migrant labor?

DS: Well, back in the late '50s and early '60s, the farmhands were moving north. They were getting out of Arkansas, going to Michigan, Illinois, or wherever, to get work, better work. I remember when I was in high school; I drove a tractor for my dad, too. I made \$5.00 a day. So they were looking for better jobs.

BB: Did your father ever – to the best of your – did he use any other source of temporary labor, other than Mexican laborers?

DS: No.

BB: What did these men – again, from the best of your memory – what did these men do for recreation or on their down time?

DS: Well, Sunday was off and Saturday afternoon was off most weeks. The road we lived on was still gravel back then and I can remember up till midnight, the Mexicans were walking up and down the road going to the Mexican barracks over there. And what struck me as odd, on Saturday afternoons, I'd see them and I said what is that do-hickey? They'd have ole Singer sewing machines on their back. Hawk's Pawnshop got rich off selling to those Mexicans used Singer sewing machines. They were carrying them back to Mexico.

BB: So where was Hawk's Pawn? Is that in Blytheville?

DS: On Main Street and Blythe.

BB: So they'd come in and buy up every one they could get their hands on.

DS: Right.

BB: Now, did they walk to town from your place or did you carry them into town?

DS: Well, usually after they got paid, the crew leader would carry them and drop them off uptown, but they went on home from there.

BB: So they'd be on their own.

DS: Right, till Monday morning.

BB: Okay. You turned loose 300 people, who'd been working hard all week, that all have cash in their pocket. Sounds like a recipe for a little mischief and maybe a little trouble to me. Did you ever have any instances that you're aware of where that happened?

DS: Well, one Sunday afternoon, I drove an old '49 Jeep, and I was going home and I could see a red car over there parked on the dump road. I said well, it's at the Mexican barracks. So I go over and there was a white guy there and I noticed the door was open on that car. I just drove on around and I said, well, I'll see what they're doing now. Those Mexicans were getting served by two black girls and that guy told me it was \$2.00 a whack.

BB: Well, that's not something that would have necessarily been condoned, but necessarily unusual in a situation where you've got 300 men 1,000 miles from home with money in their pocket.

DS: And I remember that guy told me it was like "wham, bam, thank you, Ma'am."

BB: Amazing; amazing. Any other instances? Were these people unruly to work with?

DS: No, not really. If you didn't want to work or didn't pick cotton, Jesse would send your tail back to Mexico.

BB: So, in effect, your father's management end of this was the financial and operational of who needs – where do I need people to work today?

DS: Right.

BB: And Mr. Salinas was making sure that the people who were here were productive or they didn't stay around.

DS: That's right. One other thing. I used to have three rabbit dogs down by the old city – Blytheville city dump was down there and it's a grown-up place and behind it, they didn't use it, so it was a world of rabbits. I'd take those rabbit dogs down there when I was still in high school and I'd go out. There was a cotton field right west of it, my dad's cotton field on the line there.

And I got out of the kybo and I was looking and I thought what in the world is this? I said have the color been down here? There were tracks, car treads. I said no, something ain't right. And I walked on to the south end down there and then I was beginning to walk back and it dawned – I could see one of those Mexicans. He was pushing a car tire from the dump. They used to discard tires down there and what they were doing was making sandals out of those car tires.

BB: You mentioned that any number of these laborers on their days when they would go into Blytheville, on Saturday afternoon, they would go to this pawnshop and they'd buy sewing machines. Now, did they send those back home or did they take them back home with them? Do you remember?

DS: The man's name was Brad Sharon. He had buses that transported them back and forth from Mexico, and you could see those buses on old Highway 61. When they were going back, they were tied up on the top of those buses. There would be like 15 or 20 of them.

BB: Now, this Brad Sharon, okay, was he from this area?

DS: Blytheville; south of Blytheville.

BB: South of Blytheville. And he had, again – so maybe he had contracted with either Mr. Salinas or your father for the transportation.

DS: Yes.

BB: Now, were these school buses that – or buses that he owned or were these buses that he's leasing from the local schools during the summer or do you know?

DS: I think they were his because they were a funny color, like an olive gray or something. I don't remember how many he had, but I remember he had those buses that they transported the Mexicans.

BB: Were these like a school bus or like a Greyhound bus?

DS: I take it they were used school buses.

BB: So they would have been used school buses that he got somehow. That's amazing. Do you have any other recollections of what

these men did when they went to town on Saturday or what they would do on their day off on Sunday?

DS: I remember going by there on Sunday. I stopped one or two times. They would be washing clothes. Mostly, they just relaxed on Sunday.

BB: Just rest.

DS: Right, because picking cotton was hard.

BB: I've heard stories from other people and the general comment is always something to the effect that these individuals, on average, could pick significantly more cotton than the average local resident around here would pick. Is that your experience?

DS: To me, they didn't out-pick the people that really could pick cotton. They'd run up there with them, but well, they worked at it because one of the crew chiefs, like a dollar was like \$8.00 in Mexico, rate of exchange. I don't know if that was true or not, but he told me like a dollar, when they got home, they could exchange it for \$8.00.

BB: So they had a significant motivation.

DS: Right.

BB: Are there any other items that stick out in your memory, other than the sewing machines, that were frequently purchased items that would go back home or items that you witnessed that you thought it was rather interesting that they were taking back or sending back with them?

DS: No, those sewing machines are the only thing I can come up with.

BB: That's amazing. Go ahead.

DS: While they were here, I found out another thing. They loved their beer hot. I take it at home they didn't have that much refrigeration and here, they certainly didn't over there. But heck, they drank that beer hot.

BB: I guess it's a matter of taste.

DS: I guess it is. But they certainly did. They drank hot beer.

BB: Hot beer. Did any of them participate, that you're aware of, in any religious activities on Sunday, or was it just –?

DS: No, sir.

BB: While these men were here, did they do anything other than pick cotton? I mean were there times when there was a dead time or the weather didn't cooperate or whatever? It was either too wet to pick cotton, or the field there, you'd picked everything that was ready and other fields weren't. Did they do anything else?

DS: I don't remember because when it rained, of course you couldn't pick cotton after it rained. They had to wait a little while. But they were off.

BB: Did you have any personal relationships with any of these individuals?

DS: The one that was cooking those meals for me down there, the one that introduced, but whatever – his name was like Jesus or something like that. But he wouldn't pick cotton. They sent him back. He wasn't here but like three weeks.

BB: Well, there's going to be some of that everywhere, I suppose. Getting back to this working arrangement relationship between your father and Mr. Salinas, the laborers lived in the three barracks buildings that the gin had constructed. Where did Mr. Salinas and his family members that served as the foreman, where did they live?

DS: I remember like three of the crew leaders lived in a vacant house right south of my dad's house on the Clear Lake Road, but I don't know where Jesse Salinas lived. I take it they lived in a motel.

BB: Was Mr. Salinas, I guess, an active visible presence here at the gin, in the fields, every day?

DS: Yes.

BB: So he was an active participant in the management of this labor.

DS: Right. They rented a house in Blytheville because his dad and his mom was up here with him, but yeah, they rented a home in Blytheville.

BB: Okay, so Mr. Salinas had a home in Blytheville, rented a house in Blytheville. The crew leaders lived in housing, a vacant house, on your dad's farm.

DS: Right, three of them.

BB: Three of them.

DS: And the other two, I don't know where they lived.

BB: Would this have been a tenant house?

DS: Yes.

BB: That was no longer in use?

DS: Right.

BB: Now, did Mr. Salinas and the crew leaders have – the workers have been transported up here by Brad Sharon.

DS: Right, in those buses.

BB: Okay. How did your father and Mr. Salinas get the workers from the barracks to the particular fields where they would work on an individual day?

DS: Each one of those crew leaders had a bob truck and I take it like 40 or 50 would get in. They knew what crew they were in and they'd pick them up every morning at the barracks and Jesse would tell the crew leaders where to go. And if they didn't know, he'd go show them.

BB: Were these trucks that the gin provided or they brought with them when they came up here?

DS: They owned their own trucks. They brought them with them. They drove up from Texas, up here.

BB: So this is very much, I guess for want of a better term, on your dad's part, even though he's got to take care of the paperwork to keep these men paid and to keep track of the amount of cotton picked, which is the basis for how they're going to be paid, but the rest of it is pretty much a turnkey operation.

DS: Right.

BB: All right, now, did each individual man, each individual of the 300, did they buy their own food or did Mr. Salinas provide the food or did your father provide the food?

DS: I'd say they bought their own food.

BB: So when they went to town on –

DS: Days off, Saturday.

BB: – Saturday, they bought their own food that they were going to need for the next week.

DS: Yes, sir.

BB: Typically, as best you know, what did they eat?

DS: Beans and rice. I'd call them tortillas, but that's what they cooked down there on those stoves when I've watched them. And I'd say that's what they ate.

BB: I'm trying to see if there's anything else. Any other memories of this period that – anything else that sticks in your mind that you can tell us about that you found interesting or unusual or appeared odd to you because you had this new culture arriving in mid-September every year?

DS: What I couldn't imagine, that old city dump, you could see them down there on their off days, on the weekends. You could see them going back and forth to the city. Well, I guess they were getting those tires, but you wouldn't have caught me in that old city dump.

BB: There you go. Get this going. Okay, Mr. Stallings, now, this has got to be kind of a weird situation here. You're on this farm, out from town, and you've got these three barracks buildings just down the road from you, and for ten months out of the year, they're just three more buildings. And for two months out of the year, you've got 300 men living just down the road from you, most of whom you don't know, other than maybe by sight. You don't know who they are or where they've been, what they do, and for the vast majority of them, you can't communicate with them. Did that cause any difficulties for you or your family?

DS: Well, my mom was scared to death of them and she'd get on me because I'd go over there every now and then because I wanted to stay over there sometimes and hunt around there. But she was scared of them. Locked the doors when we would go in and out.

BB: And what was your father's response to this?

DS: Well, they won't hurt you. Well, they might. I don't know nothing about them, but most of them were small, little small guys. And I remember the first week they were here, they carried some of them out and they'd pick a lock of cotton out of a bough instead of grabbing and pulling. They'd pull one at a time. They'd have to show them. After they got the hang of it, most of them were pretty good pickers.

BB: So not all of these people were seasoned cotton pickers when they arrived here.

DS: No.

BB: Now, was that every year that would be the case?

DS: Yes. I'd say 80 percent of them had never picked cotton.

BB: So they knew what they were coming here to do. They knew how much they were going to be paid and they knew that their pay was based on how much they picked.

DS: Yes, sir.

BB: So if they didn't know how to pick, they had to figure it out pretty quickly.

DS: They had to learn.

BB: They had to learn and the learning curve was pretty fast.

DS: Right.

BB: But that didn't pose any problem because they were so motivated to make the money that they picked it up pretty quickly.

DS: Ninety-five percent of them did.

BB: What about the 5 percent who didn't?

DS: They went back to Mexico.

BB: They went back right away.

DS: Right.

BB: So they didn't hang around here. Mr. Sharon would make – Mr. Salinas would contact Mr. Sharon and back to Mexico they went.

DS: Yes, sir, that's the way I think it went. They'd get a busload. I mean that ole bus, I guess they'd haul 50 or 60, and they'd send them back to Mexico, but you had to produce or they wouldn't mess with you.

BB: If they took – let's say it's the middle of September and your 300 laborers have arrived. And within or at the end of the first week, between your father and Mr. Salinas, they've identified 30 or 40 of them here, who just hadn't made the grade. Or they've indicated they don't want to do this and then arrangements were made to take them back home.

DS: Right.

BB: Would they be replaced? Would they come back with another 30 or 40 to replace them or did you just work the 250 that were left?

DS: They just worked the ones that were left. They didn't replace them. But I'd say out of 300, it might be five or six that they had to send back. They didn't send back 40 or 50.

BB: So this wouldn't have been something – it was the isolated case for somebody. Now, do you remember any instances where – accidents are gonna happen – did any of them get sick or get injured that had to be taken care of?

DS: I remember one broke his arm when he was getting off the truck at the Mexican barracks over there and they had to go have his arm set. I remember that.

BB: Now, did they send him home?

DS: I don't know. I don't really know, but I remember one broke his arm. I'm sure they sent him home.

BB: But that was not something that happened with any frequency.

DS: No, sir.

BB: All right, I'm going to pause this again. Thank you, that helps here. All right, Mr. Stallings, I've heard in other interviews that – you had mentioned the foremen that worked for Jesse Salinas brought their own bob trucks with them. I've heard in other interviews that these foremen I guess kind of custom decorated their trucks. Did that happen in your instance? Can you describe some of these?

DS: Yes, sir. They were the best-looking bob trucks I have ever seen. I could not believe them.

BB: Well, how would they be different than the bob truck you would have out here, the farm truck you would have here locally?

DS: They would have spinners on the front wheels, like they were chrome back then. I never seen chrome on bob trucks and they had hubcaps on them. Some of them had hubcaps and they had designs, some kind of designs on the sideboards on their beds of their pickup trucks, and they had them painted good, too. Every one of them was sharp.

BB: So these things, it would be almost like your classic car enthusiast today, just keeping it all shined up and sharp looking. That's the way they would do with their farm truck.

DS: Yes, sir. They were sharp. I remember that.

BB: Anything else unusual about them, this keeping them clean and fancy with decorations on them.

DS: They didn't get dirty. They kept them clean. I guess they washed them and cared for them in a car wash. They were spotless.

BB: Just on the outside or the bed of the truck, too?

DS: Yes, everything. They were spotless.

BB: That's amazing, yes. Okay, we're back. Mr. Stallings, can you kind of paint me a picture of how these laborers were clothed, how they were dressed, and what did they wear when they went to the fields? And then tell me about how the crew leaders dressed and then how Mr. Salinas, the boss of this operation, appeared.

DS: Well, what I remember about the laborers was most of them wore like jeans and a shirt, laborer shirt back then, and they had sandals. All of them wore sandals. Most of them did. Ninety-five percent of them had sandals they made out of car tires out of the city dump, and that's what they used while they were picking cotton.

But the crew leaders, they were dressed a little bit better. Like I said, khakis and western shirts and western hats, and Jesse Salinas, he dressed sharp.

BB: So what do you mean sharp? How?

DS: Well, it was always ironed and starched. His khakis had a crease in them and some days, he wore a western hat. Not a straw hat. The crew leaders all wore a straw hat, but Jesse wore like a felt hat or a beaver hat or something. But I know he dressed nice. I remember that.

BB: Now, the crew leaders did they work in the fields, or were they just management?

DS: Just management. They did not work in the fields. They weighed the cotton as they picked it, brought it to the trailers or the truck. Sometimes, they'd have to use their trucks to dump it all. But they were the weigh bosses.

BB: Okay, now, in that aspect of the operation, when they're weighing the cotton, and the laborers are going to be paid by your father based on how much cotton they've picked, correct?

DS: Right.

BB: Now, when the crew boss, who works for Jesse Salinas, keeps the records of those weights, is he reporting that to Mr. Salinas or is he reporting, giving that weight information to your father?

DS: He gave it to Jesse and Jesse carried it to the gin. Like, each one of them had a number from 1 – 50 and like, you know how they kept it and turned it in. That's how they kept up with the weights.

BB: So in effect, then, if I can make sure I have this picture correctly, your father is a landowner and the Mexican crew is picking his cotton, but primarily, he's the gin owner and keeps track of the payment side of the labor operation. Jesse Salinas manages everything about the picking and the delivery of the cotton to the gin.

DS: Right.

BB: Okay. That's a real interesting arrangement.

DS: He did a good job. Ole Jesse was sharp.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 41 minutes

DRAFT