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Interview no. 1596

Elio J. Pompa

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Elio J. Pompa

Interviewer: Mireya Loza

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Avondale, Arizona

Date of Interview: January 11, 2008

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Elio J. Pompa was born in 1956, in Chihuahua, Mexico; during the early 1950s, his father worked in the bracero program; he labored in the fields of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas; in 1958, when Elio was roughly two and a half years old, his family immigrated to the United States; he lived in a labor camp in Litchfield Park, Arizona, with his family until he was roughly seventeen years old; during that time, he also worked in the fields; he later became a firefighter. Mr. Pompa briefly talks about his father's work with the bracero program; as a bracero, he labored in the fields of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas; in 1958, when Elio was roughly two and a half years old, the family immigrated to the United States; he remembers they traveled seasonally with other families and groups of braceros; by the time he was five years old, he was working in the fields with women and other children; his father regularly labored in a different field and on occasion in a different camp altogether; Elio explains that in Casa Grande, Arizona the family was subjected to what he believed were third world living conditions with bare dirt floors and no heating or running water; moreover, meals had to be prepared outdoors, over an open flame; his father eventually found permanent work with Goodyear Farms, and they settled at the accompanying labor camp in Litchfield Park, Arizona; although everyone worked hard, they also played hard by listening to music and drinking to unwind; Elio and the other children played sports or hide-and-seek; he even remembers his father making him and his brother sing Christmas carols and "The Star-Spangled Banner" for company; he was proud of the transition they had made; Elio also mentions several other anecdotes about his experiences, including the strong attachments he formed and getting picked up by immigration officials; he lived in the camp with his family until he was roughly seventeen years old, and he eventually became a firefighter; he concludes by stating that he and his family were able to use the opportunities that the bracero program offered to their advantage.

Length of Interview 72 minutes

Length of Transcript 26 pages

Name of Interviewee: Elio J. Pompa
Date of Interview: January 11, 2008
Name of Interviewers: Mireya Loza

Hi. I'm Mireya Loza. It is the 11th of January, 2008. I am in the Estrella Community College in Arizona. I'm here with Elio J. Pompa. Can you actually state your birth date, your birth thing?

EP: Sure. As it's on my birth certificate, it's Jesus Eliovardo Pompa. But I have – that name was changed for me when I was in sixth grade. I had an Anglo teacher, Mrs. Smith; I'll never forget her. She said my name is not one that she liked. She didn't care for it. She shortened it, played with it, and she mentioned one day, she goes, "Heliovardo, your name now is Helio because I am not gonna say the whole thing." I mean what did I know? I was in sixth grade. So ever since then I have been Helio Pompa.

ML: Can you tell me a bit about when and where you were born?

EP: I was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, in 1956. My dad had been a bracero in the very early '50s. He and my mother had married early. And as a bracero he saw an opportunity, he'd heard about it through friends, relationships that he had in Mexico. And my understanding, and over many conversations with my dad, in the very early '50s he had an opportunity to come over as a bracero. So he came over with a group of men, and I want to say at least a dozen. And liked the Bracero Project was intended to do – the labor shortages that were going on because of the war – he had opportunities to work in several parts of Arizona, southern California, Texas, New Mexico.

And over time, he settled in Casa Grande, Maricopa, Stanfield, pretty much the southwest region of Maricopa County. And it was time for him to go back to Mexico. He had a wife, and both my sister and myself were conceived, born in Mexico. He came back as a bracero, back in – from '52 back to about '56, '57. And my sister and I were with my mom in Chihuahua. And then he came back and got us and applied for visas. We got our visa standard in the United States legally and began to make a life for us here in about late 1957.

ML: Do you remember what life was like in Chihuahua with you and your mom when your father left?

EP: You know, I was probably about a year-and-a-half old, so those memories for me are nonexistent. I just don't remember. My sister tells me of the apartment, if you will, that we lived in. Central Chihuahua with, you know, aunts and uncles close by. But I don't have much of a memory of growing up in Chihuahua. Obviously, I was too young. My memories are more of when I'm here in the United States in Arizona.

ML: What age did you come to the US at?

EP: I was about two, so in about late 1957, early 1958, is when we arrived. And by that time I was about 2 ½ years old. When my memories start to click in, so to speak, I remember being about four. And I still have very vivid memories of – we moved a lot, and I didn't know why we moved a lot other than we just moved with a group of people. There was a lot of braceros. There was some with families, some without. We were the minority in terms of my dad being a bracero. He was the one that worked on bringing his family over. But there was a lot of single men. I remember that.

The white hats, the cowboy shirts, the jeans, the boots, and they had a certain work ethic that I remember, that when it was time to go to work, you went to work. I tell stories to my own kids about what I remember starting as early as age four. People used to pick cotton, now they have machines that do it. But back then, we used to have this long sack that was probably 10' or 12' beneath your legs. You had a belt; you clipped it on. If you were old enough to walk, you went to the worksite. My mom, my dad, my sister, me, and at that time even my youngest brother, Umberto, who was born in Texas.

And up until many years later, we didn't realize and we didn't really know why he was born in Texas, but it was part of that seasonal travelling that Umberto was born in San Antonio. But I remember that long sack between your legs. All I was told was take that little cotton, put it between your legs and being 4 ½, 5 years old. I was just – I thought that was life, that's what we do. We just work. And I remember looking around, and there was dozens and dozens of people doing the same thing that I was, some with families, most without. And that was my introduction to the United States labor force.

As young as we were, you were put to work. Not so much by – if anything else, more for necessity. The more people, obviously, working, the more money was generated, so –

ML: Do you recall whether families who worked in the camps, like yourself, were mixed together to work with these single men, these braceros? Or did you work in separate [inaudible]?

EP: No. You know, we were kind of all in one group. The men, the braceros that I remember – I remember my dad working off with another group, and I'm not sure if that was by design in terms of they had the hardest work going on that day and they would leave some of the women and the kids in a different part of the camp or the place where we were working. Whether it was the grapes, whether it was cotton, whether it was onions, whether it was beets, whether – I mean I have a saying that, you know, somebody asked me not too long ago and says, "Well, what exactly did you pick when you were a kid?"

I said, "Well, pretty much if you ate it, I think we picked it." And that's what I remember. But I remember my dad being gone for up to eight, ten hours. And we wouldn't see him until later. And sometimes they would get picked up, trucked, and taken to another worksite. And I'm sure that was by design. They had just different priorities for them.

ML: Do you recall where you lived during this period when you moved around?

EP: I remember living in Casa Grande in an area that most people would probably relate to third-world conditions: dirt floors, no heating, if you were gonna cook, you cooked outside, outhouses. And if you were lucky to have an outhouse, that was a luxury. And when it really came to – I don't know if I had a flashback or what, but years ago with the movie La Bamba, at the very beginning of the movie, they show what I think is part of that bracero movement where these – you know, Ritchie and his mom and their family live in an orchard. They have tents. They cooked outside. They made tortillas and frijoles.

And the men, you know, they're out working and mom was left with the kids. And if they were working, they were out. But that kinda popped into my head. It was like a light bulb went on, and I went – I don't know subconsciously I had wanted to forget that or had just forgotten it, but when I saw that part of the movie, I went, "I lived that life." I lived that life from about the age of four through about seven or eight. And I remember that. I remember the tents. I remember the people. But those were conditions that,

as a child, we thought that was as good as it gets. That was life. That was our home.

That was – we cooked dinner over an open flame at night. That was – that’s just the way it was done. And then, you know, a few weeks would pass; you would pack everything up, put it on a paneled station wagon. You’d hitch rides with people in trucks, and you’d move on to the next site. I remember Stanfield, living in Stanfield, Maricopa, Casa Grande, the furthest south or southern part of the valley, now. And I remember going to Texas and the San Antonio, Austin area, and that’s in that region that my brother was born. And we also went to southern California, you know. We went to San Jose for a brief period of time.

And after discussions with my dad – because when I got to be about 5 ½, 6 years old, we settled in an area called Litchfield Park or Waddell, in that area. And my dad, bless his heart, I think he saw and he had a vision of what he wanted for his family. He didn’t want us traveling and being those seasonal workers. And I remember talking to my dad years ago. He says, “No. I wanted an education for you guys. I wanted us to grow roots somewhere. And the only way to do that was to take a job with Goodyear Farms. And when he went to work for Goodyear Farms, that’s when the camp life started.

And a lot of the braceros and their families, relatives, whatever, saw that very same opportunity. And when we settled in at the camp, which is on Litchfield Road and Alsop, which is all red-tile roofs and stucco homes now, we actually had a home. I didn’t know what it was like to step on concrete floors and to sit on a couch. And I don’t think I saw my first TV until I was probably four-and-a-half, five years old. But that – we were just thrilled to death. We thought we’d just moving on up, baby. We’re in the camps now, so we’re somebody. You know, our names are in the phone book.

And it doesn’t matter because we didn’t have a phone anyway. But that’s when – that is my most vivid memories is arriving at the camps, and then creating those relationships with the other families, that they were the same as us. They weren’t any different.

ML:

What were the living conditions of the braceros in relationship to the families? Did they have a specific area that was designated for them?

EP: You know, I think my dad – as hard as he was, disciplinarian – and man, he’s one of the hardest workers I’ve ever met, which I think translated to a lot of the characteristics that my brothers and my sisters and I have as far as work ethic go. But I remember him being a very generous man, you know, reaching out and inviting three or four of them to dinner. My mom would sometimes complain, “[**Speaking Spanish**]. You’re killing me. You’re bringing all these guys for dinner.”

But he saw, I think, these men struggling to just get enough to eat and not making enough money to sustain themselves, but yet also inviting them into his house, even though if it was just a tent or under a tree or by the truck or – even at the camp. That’s something that my dad did. But they had worse living conditions. I remember visiting with my dad and on – you know, when there wasn’t work, you know, unfortunately the culture – well, I shouldn’t say unfortunately, but the way these people – they worked hard, but they loved to party. They loved their beer and their cigarettes because everybody smoked, and their tequila.

And if you had some burritos and frijoles and beer and tequila, the music was always going. There was always a guitar somewhere. Somebody always played the guitar. I’ll never, ever forget that. And the most amazing thing is my dad would invite these men. But they were isolated in an area where, if you don’t have a family and if you don’t have little ones with you, it was nothing more than a blanket on a floor, a blanket on the floor. And you were lucky if you had a roof over your head.

But that’s what I remember about my dad just being an incredibly generous guy, inviting them to our dinner table, inviting them for a drink of water or a beer or, you know, come over here and spend some time with us and giving them something – and I think it made some of them feel very homesick because they had that family back in Mexico, they just opted to leave and for a better life. But – and I’m positive that the reason my dad did that is because he was there once without a family, and he was just giving back.

ML: And how did a lot of the braceros treat you at the age of four and five? You know, seeing as though they missed their children?

EP: You know, I remember them always digging in their pocket and giving us a quarter or a nickel. If they had a quarter, they’d give it to you; or if they had a dime, they’d hand you something. And I don’t know if that’s part of the culture or part of that Mexican

culture deep in Mexico. I remember when we'd visit Mexico and my cousins and aunts and uncles later, one of my uncles would always reach in his pocket, this crusty, little, old greasy peso. He'd hand it to us, "[speaking Spanish]." And they'd give you money. It's like, okay, well, he's handing me money. Let's go spend it.

But I remember always them being very gentle. They were grateful, I think. And my dad used to make me and my brother – this is so embarrassing – he used to make us sing – by this time my brother and I were in kindergarten and first grade. And we did the Pledge of Allegiance and, of course, you had to sing The Star-Spangled Banner. And me and my brother didn't know any other words. I mean it was around Christmastime, we'd sing Christmas songs. And he'd say, "[speaking Spanish]." Come on, Dad, don't make us sing. "[Speaking Spanish]."

So me and my brother, we'd stand there like right at attention like we're right in the Marine Corps. And we'd sing Jingle Bells, Merry Christmas. I mean we'd sing The Star-Spangled Banner, and afterwards it's like, okay, are you done now? But he would do that. He said, "[speaking Spanish]." And my dad was so proud. There was never a prouder moment than when I think he realized that he had transitioned from Mexico to America, and his kids were in school. They were getting an education. We're building a life, and we had roots. We were just – it's like planting seeds in a garden and watching them grow. Those are things that you don't realize then, but you realize later.

ML: And was the relationship that they had with you any different than with your sister, seeing as though she was a girl?

EP: No. I don't think the relationship was any different. I think as that culture goes, I think, you know, certainly the women married very early. And there was – I remember much later on in life, when my older sister was in her late teens – 14, 15, 16 – and they were looking at her a little differently. And we were like – and me and my – I was four years younger than her, so she was 16, I was 12. I think my parents raised us in a manner – strict, strict Catholics – between right and wrong. But in that regard, yeah, there was always certain situations that we might get ourselves a little bit more into a riskier place.

But, you know what, I think my dad – my father was a big guy, big guy. I'm not small, as you can see, but he was bigger than I was, just a towering man, very intimidating. I don't think they wanted to mess with my dad. And, you know what, I remember so many

parties. I remember – it was fun because my mom and dad would be getting dressed up, and they said, “[Speaking Spanish].” And it was a seasonal thing or it was the holidays or it was just because. We’re going over, you know, **Magya**’s house. I remember Magya and Lupe. And we’d go there, and they had kids.

So we’d get there, and the kids would go off and play, and the ladies would be in one corner talking and drinking, and the men would be around the beer talking and drinking. And like I said, somebody always had a guitar. There was always music. There was music at every party, and it was always so much fun. We didn’t wanna leave. I mean we’re talking late, late into the hours: 11:00, 12:00, 1:00. And everything was still going on. And there were families that were just congregating. We all knew each other. I mean we knew which camp you lived in.

We knew the bus had to swing by pick up the kids at Camp 52, and then 53 and 54, and then it would finally drop us off at school. So we knew each other through several areas: 1.) school; and 2.) was we all worked the same fields together and our families grew up together. We had so much in common.

ML: So how were these men who were in these communities **[inaudible]** three to six months, socialize? Would they get integrated really quickly?

EP: You know what, they did and primarily because of the work that they all did was the same work that my dad did. And my dad and some of the other families, I think, were extending, I think – just being out of courtesy or just being gracious hosts to them – because we knew they were just there for just a short period of time. And it’s amazing because sometimes the families that came in with seasonal braceros left. You’d have great relationships with these kids, and all of a sudden, from one day to the next, there was no notice. They just left. I mean they didn’t have an obligation to tell you, “By the way, we’re moving out, and we’re leaving next Tuesday.”

From one day to the next, they’d be gone. But they did integrate well into that culture because they were one and the same. They were almost like, not necessarily a band of brothers, but they were all after the same goal: to make money, to take advantage of the opportunities. And most of them, I remember, were single. I remember my dad trying to set many of those braceros up with, you know, some of the younger women, some of the single women that just were part of that culture that were born here but not part of

the bracero movement. And, yeah, they did integrate well, and we all spoke the same language. We were all trying to do the same thing.

ML: When your dad would try to set them up, were there ever any successful matches?

EP: You know, I can't tell you that for a fact, but I just remember that there was this dance hall in Avondale. It was called The Big Seven. And that was the place to be Fridays and Saturday nights. **Cucko** was the main guitar player. And he was the singer. He – it was his band. And I gotta tell you, I learned to drive a car at the age of four-and-a-half. I had my first accident at six. I drove my car into the ditch, or my dad's car into the ditch, and he wasn't very happy with me. But I couldn't reach the pedals, couldn't reach the brakes. But he used to put a hat on me, put a big pillow and a blanket, "[Speaking Spanish]."

Let's go drive, and off – I'd take mom to groceries. But The Big Seven was a nightclub, and it was mostly for 99.9 percent Hispanic. It was right there on Highway 80 and Central Avenue in Avondale. And I used to drive my parents there. I did. My dad used to put this little black suit on – where he got it I have no idea – and black tie, white shirt. He'd put the same suit on. He kinda reminded me of Barney Fife because he always had a bow on; he always had his hat on. My dad was a very handsome man. He was a very, very attractive, very handsome, very kind of a man's man. He just was.

My mom, jet-black hair, beautiful eyes, just had that movie-star character, just striking. And they were a hot-looking couple. And they'd get out, and they'd dance. They'd always invite a couple, and sometimes I remember – wait a minute, who's that guy in the back? It dawned on me, it's like, oh, that's one of the braceros, one of the workers, that seasonal guys. And there'd be another lady in the back. I'd drive them to The Big Seven, big dance, drink, sometimes heavily, but I was their designated driver. I didn't know that's what I was called, but I was their driver. So a lot of fights there, I remember that.

Hispanic men are very passionate about their relationships and about their women. And tragically, several years later – Cucko was like the Elvis Presley of the camps. He was just hot. He could play the guitar. He could play the accordion. He had his own band. He worked for Goodyear Farms. But he was kinda like the boss. He'd hire – he'd have all of these people that chopped cotton

for him, lettuce, onions, you name it. But he had a work group that he was in charge of the pay and the hours and things like that.

And during the summer, and sometimes when the kids were in school, most of his workforce was women. And like I said, he had that Elvis Presley persona. And I know – and these are memories that up until about 15, 20 years ago I didn't really put together. But he – all of the women adored him. I mean it's like that rock star mentality that he had. But tragically, he was murdered at The Big Seven. I think I was, I don't know, 10 or 11 years old. And I just remember the camp because he lived – we had a row of houses, and there was like five or six units per building, two bedrooms each.

Ours was two bedrooms with eight people, six kids and mom and dad. And he lived in the very next building. And I still remember his son, **Joey**, Catana was his last name, and just woke up one day, and I remember my dad – because we all worked for Cucko, you know, and chopping cotton. He said, “[**Speaking Spanish**].” And he told me about that. It just kind of – it was probably one of the darkest times I remember in the camps because he represented a lot of things that, you know, we work hard; we play hard. And he had a great family. And after that, it seemed like that band, that Big Seven, that nightclub thing, it just had a really dark cloud over it.

And it's – I just never recovered. And it was amazing how one person could have that kind of influence on a community, our little community, but he did. And it was like when Elvis Presley died, everybody was like, oh my god, what happened? So I just remember my parents just – they were bummed for years after that.

ML: You were talking a bit about the layout of the camp. Can you describe it a bit?

EP: Yeah.

ML: You said that there was [**inaudible**] in a room.

EP: Picture?

ML: Yeah.

EP: Picture a big football field and the track around it. That's what it was. It was an oval camp, just like a football field. And where the bleachers would be, that's where the row of houses were. And they went all the way around. And you could live – and it was

split in the middle, so when you came into the camp, you'd essentially be splitting in the middle of the football field. Like you'd be coming in at the 50-yard line from two directions, and then you'd either get into the loop, and you'd see the houses around the corners. And they – the houses were probably – and they weren't even houses.

They were small, small buildings, 800 square feet, if that, per family. And the roadways in the middle, that was our baseball field when we were growing up. That was our football field. It was our hide-and-seek place. And if we got outside of the camp, in any direction to the south it was cotton fields, onion fields, **rose** fields, watermelon fields. Goodyear Farms had a really small kind of like an operational yard where they kept some tractors and things like that. And we kinda played in that area, but a lot of ditches, a lot of trees.

And we made use of everything in terms of playing. We just did. And that's where I grew up. That was my life in that camp.

ML: So you guys would actually play **[inaudible]** something like baseball or – I don't know if you guys played soccer, but in these rows?

EP: We didn't play soccer because we didn't know there was a round ball anywhere. We just – we had a football; we had a baseball; we had a bat; and the **Frostos**. The Frostos were another family like ours, large, that had six or seven kids. We had six. And they had peculiar names, but – they were endearing names, but they – I couldn't figure out – how'd you get a name like **Titi**, you know? There was Titi. There was **Chiquio**. There was **Chiquia**. There was **Toleo**, **Tonkey**. And there real names were like Lorenzo, Javier, Alfredo, but how they got those other names, I don't know. That's just how we knew them.

Today's kid culture is you go to the door, you ring the doorbell, or you call them, or you send them a text to say, "Hey, you wanna play? You wanna hang out?" We were so stupid. We didn't know any better. Me and my brother Bert, Umberto back then, we'd just go and stand outside their apartment, if you will; we'd yell their name. We didn't go anywhere near the door. We'd just yell their name. It's like – and all of a sudden, about 30 seconds later, they'd come out. "Hey, how you doing? Hey, you wanna go hang out? Let's go throw the ball. Let's go ride bikes or something."

But that was so primitive. It's like we didn't know enough to knock and say, "Is Chiquio here?" We didn't do it. We just yelled their name. They'd do the same thing at our house. And it's like – don't ask me why. I don't – to this day I'm thinking, why did we yell their names? And we yelled it loud. And if you were inside watching TV or doing something, you'd hear the name. It was like your radar goes on. It's like, ah, their calling me. And off you go, and you'd go hang out. And it's – we laugh about it now, myself and my brothers, when we bring that up.

I said, "You know, I should do that to you one of these days, amigo." He lives in a very nice, very upscale neighborhood. "I should come over to your house and instead of ring the doorbell I should just yell your name." He goes, "No man, the homeowners' association will kick us out. Don't do that." But it was just bizarre stuff that we did back then. We just didn't know any better.

ML: So the families lived around the football stadium? These braceros, the braceros who lived in the camp, where would they –

EP: They lived in whatever was vacant. And there were times during the year that the people who had settled – there was probably only like four or five families. And there was enough there for, probably, about 20 families. And they would live in a vacant house, one that was available, but they never had the heat turned on. They lived by candlelight. They heated stuff up outside. And they had a mattress on the floor, if they were lucky. And that was it. They just isolated them to one part of the camp. And there was a – there wasn't segregated this is the family side, this is the bracero side. It's whatever was open, whatever happened to be there for the taking, if you will.

ML: And how did they – was there someone assigned to cook? Did they just cook themselves?

EP: They were the housekeeper. They were the cooks. They – you could tell which men had been together for a while and which ones had traveled, the seasonal work wherever it was, which ones were traveling as a group because it's almost like a fraternity. They hung out together. They drank their beer together. They partied together. They'd come over and pay dad or one of the other neighbors. We were one of the fortunate ones to have a car. The Frostos had a car. The **Alcentars** had a car. The Lopez's had a car. But they'd come over and ask for a ride into town. And they'd pay you a dollar or two for your troubles and stuff. But –

ML: Did you drive them?

EP: I did on more than one occasion. “[Speaking Spanish].” And I’m thinking, wow, a dollar, what can I do with a dollar? Back then I could do a lot with a dollar, and I didn’t have to save as many pop bottles to go buy a pop or a candy bar, but no, gladly. I got pulled over one time by the only sheriff that worked the entire – I’m convinced the entire part – the entire west part of Maricopa County. I got pulled over. And it just freaked me out. I was – I couldn’t have been more than eight or nine. I had my hat on. I was sitting on my blanket. I had my little wood block on my shoe so I could push the pedals.

And I had two guys in the back with me. And he went one direction; I was going the other. And into town it was only like about two miles into Litchfield Park. And, yeah, he turned around, pulled over. And he goes, “How old are you?” I said, “I’m eight.” He goes, “Where you going?” I said, “I’m taking these guys to the store.” And these poor braceros, they were so nervous because they thought, great, pay this guy to take us into town and now we’re gonna get either, A.) thrown in jail, or B.) deported. And I’m eight years old negotiating with a police officer why I have these two men in the back.

I’m taking them to the grocery store. They don’t have anything to eat. I mean that was the bottom line. He goes, “Well, I can’t let you drive.” And I’m going, “What, I’m a seasoned driver. I’ve been driving for about four years.” And he – of course, he didn’t buy that. I was trying to humor my way out of it, but nevertheless, I was scared to death because I thought I was gonna go to jail. He put us all back in the back of his car, parked the car, took us back to the camp, and he dropped us off. And he goes, “Don’t do that again.” Of course, that didn’t stop me. I kept driving. But, yeah, that was an interesting story. But, yeah, I used to haul these guys around.

ML: And in that occasion, did the police officer ask the braceros for ID or anything?

EP: You know what, no, no. There was a certain understanding that this sheriff’s deputy – and I wish I could remember his name. What I remember of him as a child, just a kind, older man. And when I say older, I’m talking, at that time, probably late 50s, early 60s. And I think he was well aware of west of Litchfield Park, that’s where the migrants are; that’s where the illegals are; that’s where the Mexicans are. That’s their work zone. That’s their

stuff. Unless there was true trouble, fights – I don't remember any ever – gunfire, no gang activity.

It was such a – I don't wanna say clean life in terms of crime – but we weren't exposed to city problems. We just weren't. So he left us alone. He really did. And he'd cruise by every now and again. He'd wave at everybody; everybody would wave at him, and everybody knew his name. He was just a really nice guy. So he never asked us. There is one story that comes to mind that you asked me about. Did he ever ask for ID? I remember we were chopping cotton. Cotton was probably about 2 ½, 3' high. And in the summertime, that would start the day after school was over. You got your hoe. You sharpened it up.

You got your hat, your gloves. I had a little transistor radio. I used to put it on my belt, which is – now I remember why everybody hung around me. I thought I was cool, but it was because I was the one that had the music, so. And I remember building relationships with other families that would come in for the seasonal work. And you'd see the braceros, the single guys that are around. They always wear the white hat. I don't know what it was but a white hat. They all had a white hat. Nobody had a black hat. All of these braceros always had a white hat. But we're chopping cotton. And I was first introduced to La Migra at an early age.

To me, I didn't know what the hell that meant. What's La Migra? I didn't know. I was about 8 years old, 7 years old. And we're doing our thing, chopping the weeds out of the cotton. And one of the men screamed "La Migra. **[Speaking Spanish]**." And everybody, out of that 15 or 20 workforce with the exception of me and my older sister and some of the other teens, we spoke English. We look around like, why is everybody running. And these guys dropped their tools, and they are literally running as fast as they can because off in the distance you could see the green – the olive green vans in a trail of dust coming.

And I'm going, "Why is everybody running?" And it didn't dawn on me until later, when the big bus came – there was a green bus that came – they were making an immigrant bust, an illegal immigration bust. And I got picked up. And one of the guys comes up to me, he says, "**[Speaking Spanish]**?" He asked me in Spanish, so I figure I'd better answer this guy in Spanish. "**[Speaking Spanish]**." My dad would drop us off. He had to go do his job. And he goes, "**[Speaking Spanish]**." If he'd have asked me in Spanish, I'd have answered – or if he'd asked me in English, I would have answered in English.

And all I remember is jumping on this bus. And I'm going, "We're going for a ride or what's the deal here?" And I'm like, field trip time. Anything like I don't have to work anymore. This is cool. Where are we all going? And it – I wasn't exactly the brightest at 8 years old, but one of the guys told me. He says, "They're taking us back to Mexico." And I'm going, oh. The light bulb came on. I went, "Hey, time out, wait a minute." It took one hour for me to convince these people that, yes, I was born in Mexico. I do have papers; I just don't have them with me.

My dad – it just so happened that Cucko, the band guy, the Elvis Presley of the community, he came over and said, "No. This is – this young man belongs to Gilgardo Pompa who works for Goodyear Farms who is here legally. So you have no right to take this young man." He says, "He needs to stay here." And it was really one of these things. He's going. He's staying. He's going. He's staying. And honestly, for a few minutes I thought, man, I'm going back to Mexico, and I don't know what I'm gonna do when I get there. Okay.

So it was pretty frightening, but the most tragic part about that is young men that came over as braceros, they were as young as 16, 17 years old. Men by the Hispanic and Mexican standards, still kids by American standards, that never really had a childhood but they were here to work and send money back. They'd be gone. You'd never see them again. That part was sad to see. You'd see families disappear.

ML: Were there any braceros of the other type, which had temporary work contracts that were able to stay there?

EP: Oh, yeah. You could – it was as clear as night and day because they would take their wallet – and I still remember the immigration officials examining it and looking at it and examining and looking and giving it back. And they were legal; they could stay. They had a work visa. They were there legally. And those were the ones that got to stay and – that used to happen three or four times a summer, and those are the people that – I didn't understand it then, but I understand it now – as to their – they had a right to be here for work. They were part of the braceros movement. So, yeah, there was a lot of them that stayed.

But those poor people who didn't have any documentation, families were uprooted. I mean men, women, their kids, adios, see you later.

ML: And did those two types, the documented and the undocumented types, mix together? The men who had their bracero ID who came through the program, did they mix in with the undocumented people?

EP: Where I grew up, yes. They all mixed in together. They all blended well together. There was –

ML: And so you kinda saw them as one community because they were always together?

EP: Absolutely. I never – I don't remember any conflict where there was a choosing of sides. Well, you're here legally; I'm here illegally. It didn't make us any different. In that regard, I never – I don't remember any conflict between – I don't remember anybody ever picking sides.

ML: Did you notice that there was one group that had better conditions: work conditions or living conditions?

EP: I think the people that were here legally, I think knew the laws better. And I think they were more accustomed to the system, if you will, in terms of the opportunities that were there for them were greater in terms of choice of work, places to live, rather than the people who were here illegally. But nevertheless, the conditions were never like a five-star resort. I mean it just wasn't. But there was, clearly, a difference in – they would dress differently, the braceros.

ML: In what sense?

EP: Well, they still had their white hat, believe it or not. They had two white hats: one for work and one for going out. One was clean; one was dirty – because my dad had that. It's like, wow, what's with the white hat? But, I don't know, maybe they were all just good guys deep down underneath or superheroes, one or the other. But they just dressed differently. They always had a very neatly white, pressed shirt, cowboy style; boots, the belts, the big buckles. And you could tell that they were making money, and they were – up to a certain point, they were seeing some of that success of making American money.

You could clearly tell there was a difference in the way they dressed, the braceros, versus the individuals who didn't have any documentation who were here illegally, if you will. But when it –

ML: [Inaudible] interest?

EP: They had less. They had less. We used to give a lot of clothes away. Like I said, my parents were very, very generous. I remember walking over to families with sacks of clothing, whether it was t-shirts or socks or things that we obviously didn't wear anymore. We'd take them over there, but it was very evident that they just didn't have as much. They were looking for rides wherever they went. To us, at that time, they were just another group of kids to play with. But –

ML: Did you guys ever play, like, baseball with them or [inaudible]?

EP: Oh, yeah, absolutely. We were always looking for extras for baseball, for football. And speaking Spanish initially, they didn't speak English. So we had to kinda work that out a little bit. But we – at that time, growing up, we're in first, second, fifth, sixth grade, seventh grade. We thought we were, like, it because not only were we here, we spoke English. And there was sometimes a little bit of a barrier in communication, but, yeah, they were our friends just like everybody else was. And as you get older, you'd kinda – coming up on seventh and eighth grade, wow, that girl's like really cute.

Every time there was a party at camp, there was always live music, and if there wasn't live music there was always music somewhere. So you always had an opportunity to build on relationships, to make new friends, and things like that. But these – most of these families were traveler, seasonal workers. They'd be gone from one day to the next, so you almost kinda – it was instilled in you, you can't build too many relationships with these people because from one day to the next they'd be gone. But we know who the steadfast families were that were there.

ML: Did you ever notice if some of the braceros who came through the program wanted to date girls that were born in the US or raised in the US so that they could stay?

EP: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

ML: Did that happen?

EP: Oh, in the camps?

ML: Mm-hmm.

EP: Absolutely. The families that were there – as time progressed, they had sisters or people that were coming and migrating from Mexico, relatives that were parts of the other camps, sisters of a family or brothers or – you could see how, yeah, they – there was probably a lot more going on than I probably paid attention to. But the Hispanic culture, the Mexican culture is such that certainly Hispanic men love their women. You can't have too much fun without a woman. You gotta have somebody to dance with and – I don't know where – if you'd take somebody out to dinner back then what you'd do other than just go to the parties and those types of things.

But, yeah, but those are things that you just don't remember until later. **Elvida**, a Mexican lady, I remember her as very attractive, very, very pretty, kinda had that – I could be way off on this, but kinda had Marilyn Monroe blonde hair. She was the only lady with blonde hair that spoke Spanish. And to me, that was kind of odd. How can she speak Spanish if her hair is blonde? But come to find out later she dyed it, of course. So she had a couple of sisters and relationships that the braceros would get themselves close to. And they had a lot of fun, that's all I remember.

But, yeah, it wasn't uncommon for a bracero to infiltrate, if you will, a certain family or group for the purpose of wanting to date. And they probably knew that if I marry her, there's good opportunity I can stay here legally. So how many of those relationships actually occurred, I have no idea.

ML: And during the dances – just out of curiosity – was there ever any music that they played that came from different regions of Mexico that you noticed or that you didn't recognize?

EP: It was always very festive, a lot of accordion, a lot of Tejano music, a lot of guitar, a lot of guitar. And you – we could – as kids, we used to poke fun of the adults because the music would get louder, the dancing would get more – everybody's dancing, whereas initially – somebody would always start the dancing. Whether you're dancing on a concrete patio or dancing out on the grass, somebody would always start dancing. We would always gauge how much booze was on board with the dancing and the yelling and the Mexican screams that they give. But the music was a lot of Tejano, a lot of accordion.

But we knew for a fact when the men started putting their arms around each other and singing, it's like, okay, all right, this party's

out of control. So everybody's singing; everybody's dancing. I just remember, they just – they worked hard, but boy they sure loved to party. They had a lot of fun with that. But the music, I still have a lot of it in – some playing in my own car right now from my dad's era that just, for no other reason, I just like it. But as far as the music goes, it was – I just remember a lot of accordion, a lot of guitar, very, very danceable type music.

Some ballads from time to time were played where – I don't know why some men cried when they got really intoxicated, and I'm not sure – although I can guess – either they A.) were home sick, they missed their families or they just were in a place where they got very emotional. And as kids, we were looking at him. Why is that guy crying? He's – and you'd see people rally to him. It's all right. Whether they lost a loved one or memories of mom and dad or memories growing up, but I just remember some of those things. They were odd to me. It's like I don't understand why these guys are all crying, okay.

So is that what we're supposed – because I hope I don't do that when I get older because – but that's what they did. And I'm sure it's probably just old memories surfacing or missing Mexico.

ML: Did you notice any of these men were from specific regions in Mexico?

EP: I did. It seemed like the darker the bracero, the further south he was from Mexico. And my dad told me that. The lighter-complected people were closer to the border. I don't know why. Culturally, geographically, I don't know why that is. But there were different names: Mestizos, Mexicanos, [inaudible]. There were some men that I remember because my dad was born in Sinaloa. He used to call me [speaking Spanish]. They were light headed, almost redheaded blonde, green eyes, light complected, and it had a different dialect; it had a different way the way they spoke.

And I'm going, that guy speaks funny. His dialect is different. He's got an accent. And the darker the bracero, the further south they were from Mexico.

ML: Did you notice if there was any specific states where you thought, oh, there's a lot of people from here?

EP: I don't. I wanna say a lot of people –

ML: You don't?

EP: I remember my dad meeting a lot of people and a lot of men that would come over, and they'd share our dinners. **[Speaking Spanish]**. And they'd talk about **[speaking Spanish]**, you know, my home country is this or – and they'd have some pretty good conversations about that. But they all talked about their life back in Mexico. It's something they could all relate to. And the bond between these men, these braceros, was that they all came from Mexico.

They all had something in common even though they all had many differences personally in the way they either lived or they were raised or – but the one thing that bonded them was when they came over, that they all had one goal in mind and that was to be successful, make money.

ML: After '64, when the program – the Bracero Program ended, did you notice any difference in the camp? You were about 9 years old; you were 9 going on 10 at that point. Did you – do you notice anything around that period that you thought was peculiar?

EP: We didn't have as many people leaving the camp. It seemed like the camps began to establish themselves as little communities, real little communities. They began to have an identity. They began to have names associated with camps. We could get on our bikes, and we knew that we could visit **[inaudible]** at Camp 54, the **Sortas** at Camp 54. And we knew that they were gonna be there next Christmas. We knew that they were gonna be there next Easter when these families would get together for these parties. So now that you mention it, yeah, they began to get an identity in terms of the number of families that were there.

Prior to that, it was very migratory. You didn't know who was gonna move in overnight next to you. So there was a definite change.

ML: Were there – as you got older, did you notice that there were less men or more men?

EP: There were less men. They were still there; there was less men. And it's not something that I paid a lot of attention to, but there was less men working in the same areas that I used to work; whereas, prior to that '64 year, yeah, you could see the numbers were much bigger, much bigger.

ML: Did you guys start having more undocumented people or not really? **[Inaudible]** see more undocumented people?

EP: It was about the same level of undocumented workers that would come in. And to me, what I saw was there was, first of all, the man would come over. And it seemed like they would be there for a few months. And they would integrate themselves into the workforce. And they kept to themselves because, I think, they knew they were illegal. But over a period of time, then you would see them – now they have a woman in their household. And then you'd see kids. And then those are the ones that overnight you'd say, wow, they're gone. Where'd they go?

Whether they chose to pick up and leave or they were picked up somewhere else and deported, you never knew. But, yeah, the numbers decreased over time. And I think the people that were more stable in the camps, like my family and a few other families, that was just our – that was our house. That was where we grew up. That's where you went to school. The bus dropped you off and – I don't know if the illegals went outside of that workforce towards the **[inaudible]**, the Buckeye, the other parts of Casa Grande, southern California, those places, but definitely the numbers got smaller.

ML: And I guess from the age of four to ten, you were living in this community when there was a lot of braceros. Was there ever anything extraordinary that happened; illnesses or accidents that you noticed in your camp? Any amazingly interesting things that happened to specific families or –

EP: No. I can't say that I remember anything like that all.

ML: Accidents, fires, nothing?

EP: I don't even remember a fire in the whole time I was there. It's funny because I grew up to be a firefighter, and I don't remember any fires. I know we got a lot of them outside, warming fires, those types of things. But I don't remember any real big tragedies like that.

ML: Except for Cucko.

EP: Yes. And that was front-page headlines for a lot of people. That struck a chord, an emotional chord, with a lot of people but no. We had the usual broken bones from kids playing, falling out of trees, and trying to build a tree house 20 feet up. And we were

mischievous. We were so mischievous, little Hispanic kids. And there was a family – we used to call them Okies – we didn't know any better. I guess Okies was an accepted term back then. Well, I don't think it was derogatory as we weren't defaming their character or anything, they were just from Oklahoma. Who are they? They were all white and had blue eyes.

They are from Oklahoma. Oh, those are Okies, oh, okay. Up until then, I didn't know what they looked like. I didn't know an Okie yet. Until I started in school, I didn't know what blond-haired, blue-eyed people looked like. Like I said, growing up in that camp, we were very isolated. That was our bubble. That was our playing field. We didn't venture outside of that at all. And if we did, we'd always go to another camp which was identical to ours, just had a different number. So those people came over, a couple of them, Clyde and Larry. I'll never forget them. Clyde, I'd never heard of the name Clyde.

There was Umberto, Jose, Roberto. But a Clyde, that was just odd. Why is your name Clyde? But they were from Oklahoma. And come to find out later that they were no different from us. They were just Americans who just traveled working. I didn't know that happened. I thought was just reserved for the people that spoke Spanish. Kind of odd, but that's just the way it was.

ML: Did your family eventually move out of the camp?

EP: Yeah. We did. Believe it or not, we stayed in the camp until I was about 17. And you think, well, at 17 my sister was already married. My sister married at age 16, by the way.

ML: Wow.

EP: She married a young man, same age, from the Waddell area, which was similar to a camp, it just didn't have the name camp. They met in school. They married. My mom and dad were as upset as I've ever seen them, ever, because their little girl was getting married. And it's like, okay, so she's getting married. What it did is it took the older sibling out of the family group, and she went to live with this other family. She married Sal, Salvador. But we moved out later. There was government housing that was now being made available. People were referring to them as the projects, you know, and things like that.

My mom and dad made an application. I think there was certain requirements that you had to meet, and all we knew was that it was

going to be a real house not row housing that was attached to somebody else's. There was actually going to be a house with a garage, two bathrooms, three bedrooms, kitchen; it'll have a yard. So in about 1974 or '73 – no, it had to be earlier than that – 1970, '71, is when they actually got the application. They were able to buy the house through government assistance. You had to meet certain requirements. What those were at that time, I don't know. But that's when we moved out.

It was about 1970. And a lot of the families, ironically, from the camps, guess what they did? It's like all of the families went to this place in what was called Lower Avondale. And they had a certain area identified that had these cookie-cutter homes, but they were houses. That's when we moved out. We all moved out of there. I went to high school; my brothers, sisters, all went to high school, graduated. And from there we all kinda went off and made a life of our own. I think – looking back I think we had a lot of fun in the camp, met a lot of people, saw a lot of hardship. We had – we worked really, really hard. We always did.

Some of the funnest times we had was in the onion fields. I mean – if you've ever picked yellow onions, I mean they give you and assign you a certain row. They give you your clippers and your three-, four-, five-gallon buckets, and you fill them up. And it was funny because we would assign each other jobs. I mean I was pretty good. They used to call us toppers. I don't know what a topper was, but I was a topper. So me, my two brothers, and my older sister, we were the toppers. We would cut and put them in the bucket. And we would assign two of the younger kids to put them in the buckets, in the sacks. And every sack was a quarter.

So you knew if you got four sacks that was a dollar, right. But we worked and we worked and we worked and we worked. We worked awfully hard growing up. But part of that work ethic, I think, was as a result of my mom and dad. They just instilled that in us. The one thing they were always very, very adamant about was an education. My dad spoke broken English. He was a bracero. He started out as a bracero. I think that program gave him an opportunity to raise a family, make a life, and instill some character and some work ethic in his kids. As I think about every member of my family, extremely successful, every one of us.

We never would want to go back to that lifestyle, but it's that very lifestyle that allowed us to prosper and be as successful as we are.

ML:

What did you go on to do after high school?

EP: Immediately after high school I started as a firefighter. There was an opportunity there in the community in Avondale. And I took the test; I got hired as a firefighter. That's all I've ever done for the last 32 years. And people have – people used to tease me because I was a little lighter complected growing up. Some of the people in the camps, you know, "How come you don't have an accent?" I don't know. I just don't have an accent. None of us do. We didn't have that traditional Cheech Marin accent. I mean I can do one because I'm a funny guy, but we just never had it. But we used to get teased about that. But every member of my family –

ML: You guys came young enough.

EP: What's that?

ML: You guys came young enough to the US.

EP: I think so. I think we really did. And we certainly learned our lessons. We went to an all white, very upscale Litchfield Elementary, which was back then probably the very – one of the most affluent communities in the entire Maricopa County. And that taught us a lot of lessons. We learned a lot of hard lessons. You know, there was sometimes where the money – where the layoffs from Goodyear Farms – I can remember three or four or five Christmases teasing with Mom and Dad, "Hey, when are we getting a tree?" "We're not having Christmas this year."

"Why not? Oh, they're just joking. They're gonna go out and get the tree. No big deal. They're probably hiding the presents somewhere." It's getting to, like, the 22nd, the 23rd of December. It's like, "Hey, man, this – they're really pushing it this year. You guys aren't being funny." Of course, we're talking in Spanish. We says, "That's not funny." He says, "[Speaking Spanish]." And I'm going we worked awfully hard over the summer. Where'd all that cash go? But I – no gambling that I know of or – but, yeah, I remember some Christmases that you woke up on Christmas Day, it was just another day.

I mean there was nothing under the tree. And it's amazing because when you went to school – I remember going to school, "Hey, Helio, what'd you get for Christmas?" "Yeah, you know, nothing, not much. What'd you get?" " Oh, I got a minibike, and I got a color TV, and whatever." And it's like I got a deck of cards and a pair of socks or whatever. But no, there was some true hardships along the way, none of them have escaped me. But I think my

mom and dad, along with a lot of other families there; I think they did the best that they could. But I think if you look back at the Bracero Project, I think you have to realize that that was an opportunity that you either took advantage of or you didn't.

My dad was one of those that took advantage of it. While he never got to speak English, he never had an office job, he had a shovel on his back and he worked as a farm laborer for all the years that I can remember. He didn't have a big retirement waiting for him in the end. He had what he had. And he passed away a few years ago, but a lot of it, I think, has to do with that Bracero Project that gave him that opportunity. And if I think back, he made the right choices. Tough as they were, he took a big risk bringing his family here, but it was for all the right reasons.

ML: Is there anything else that you'd like to share about your father or about the way he perceived the Bracero Program or your father's experience with the Bracero Program before I finish the interview?

EP: Before my dad died – he died about four years ago – he had told me about 5, 5 ½ years ago he said, “[Speaking Spanish].” I helped him put these documents in order. And to be honest with you, he took care of that. And the way that my dad explained it to me is that the bracero movement was owed money for the time of – and he mentioned the years – and now it's 1942 to 1964 – if you were part of the bracero movement at this point, there was money taken and given back to the Mexican government, a certain percentage of their money.

ML: [Inaudible].

EP: It was never given back, plus there was either the same or a partial tax to the United States government, for what I have no idea. But there was some act, either through congress or something, about a way to reimburse braceros if you were in this timeframe. And I thought, wow, that's kinda interesting that if you've had money coming to you, why are we waiting until almost 40 years after the fact, 35, 40 years. And the best that he could explain it to me he says, “I don't know.” But he says, “I'm not gonna be around much longer. But if it would help your mother, that would be a good thing.”

I filled out all the documentation that was needed. He took it to the people that he needed to take it to. He was taking care of that. I don't know whatever happened to it, but that's the one thing that – I think you can look at the bracero movement in various different

ways. For my family, I think it gave us an opportunity that we might not otherwise have had, through my dad. We might have stayed in Mexico. I might have been living in Mexico along with my brothers and sisters. And what kind of life we would have made there, who knows?

But I think as life goes, I think there's certain opportunities, if you take advantage of them and you make the best of them – there's always gonna be hardships along the way, and we definitely saw those. We tasted them. They were – I mean we absolutely lived them. We know what those hardships were all about. Our clothes were never new, but they were never dirty. My mom kept a very tidy, very clean house. It wasn't a new couch. The bedding wasn't brand new; it might have had a hole in it or whatever, but they were always clean. We didn't have the newest car. But I think along with that – and I think part of that has to do with the culture.

There's a lot of pride instilled in the Mexican culture, in the Hispanic culture. Pride takes you a long way. And then after that, it's gotta be work ethic, and my dad had both. We're thankful for that. A lot of experiences like racism along the way. I feel for that family now that may be here illegally, that has two or three little kids with them, that they go to a department store and they're speaking Spanish where some of them must look at them, "Oh, you're here illegally. You don't belong here. You don't even speak the language." I have a different perspective on that. That was me. I was here legally, so was my family.

But they're trying to make a life just like we were 35, 40 years ago. But it's all about opportunity. And the racism that I experienced, the discrimination that I experienced, is one that I can still remember how it stung. You can't be in here. Why not? I speak English. I may not look like you. I don't dress like you, but I don't understand. As early as first grade, when I spoke Spanish and got slapped, racism was pretty rampant discrimination, particularly towards the braceros and the immigrants and the families that were – the people who were putting food on your table.

That was hard to swallow. And it either made you stronger, or you could crawl in your hole and just – I don't – be insecure the rest of your life. For us, it made us stronger. And it – we opted to realize that that's part of the differences that people have towards one another. And I talk about discrimination now to my kids. Some of the stories that I relate to them, they can't believe that that actually happened. And I can tell them, yeah, my family got thrown out of

a supermarket when we were – we still had our hats on. We had our – we smelled like onions – being asked to leave because you don't belong here. We don't want your type in here.

That was hard to take. But growing up, made the best of what was given to us, a lot of opportunities. And to this day, I mean we owe it all to my dad, part of that bracero movement; so good things, bad things about bracero movement, biggest opportunity that my family took advantage of, particularly my dad. And along the way, you're in a different country; make no mistake about it, Mexico, America, two different places. But we are who we are because of that.

ML: Thank you very much.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 72 minutes

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