

4-3-2003

Interview no. 1554

Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum by Fernanda Carrillo, 2003, "Interview no. 1554," 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: Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum

Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 3, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1554

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Minerva C. Cheatum was born in El Paso, Texas; shortly after she was born her mother died, and she was consequently raised by her maternal grandparents in Clint, Texas; while still attending high school, she began working as a clerk and typist at *Rio Vista*, a bracero processing center in Socorro, Texas; she started in August of 1957 and continued working there seasonally until 1962. Ms. Cheatum tells how she came to live with her maternal grandparents shortly after her mother's passing; she continued to live with them even after her father remarried and moved to California; her grandfather had a farm, and he often hired braceros to help him with the land; in August of 1957, when she was eighteen years old, she began working as a clerk and typist at *Rio Vista*, a bracero processing center in Socorro, Texas; she provides a detailed description of the facilities in general, the screening process, how the paperwork was filled out, and how the braceros reacted and what they said; there was a particular form, called a 345, which was essential to the entire process for the braceros; they were given the form at the processing center in Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico, and it was required as a form of identification upon entering the United States; sometimes college students and professional writers would pose as braceros in order to later write about their experiences; she also relays several interesting anecdotes.

Length of interview 58 minutes

Length of Transcript 27 pages

Name of Interviewee: Minerva Cheatum

Date of Interview: April 3, 2003

Name of Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

FC: This is an interview with Mini Cheatum on April 3, 2003 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Fernanda Carillo. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History project. Good afternoon ma'am. What is your full name, ma'am?

M: Minerva Christine Cheatum.

FC: When and where were you born, ma'am?

M: I was born in El Paso. In the old Providence Hospital which is now under the freeway.

FC: (Laughs) Did you grow up here?

M: I grew up in Clint.

FC: In Clint?

M: I've lived in El Paso for 49, 48 days and then my mother died. Over in Sunset Heights. We were the Sunset Groceries?

FC: Oh yes.

M: My parents lived in the apartments over it. Over Sunset Groceries.

FC: And your lived there for 48 days and then...

M: And then I lived in a nursery for six months. Then they brought me here to Clint. To my maternal grandparents.

FC: Oh, your grandparents live here?

M: They were supposed to, I was supposed to stay here until my dad remarried. My father remarried nine years later and moved to California and I stayed.

FC: You stayed?

M: I stayed with my grandparents.

FC: What schools did you attend during that time? Schools here? What schools here?

M: I went to gradeschool.

FC: Gradeschool?

M: Graduated from SOMETHING in high school.

FC: And college? Where?

M: I went to UTEP.

FC: UTEP? Did you graduate?

M: Back then it was Western College. First, it was Texas Western College. Then I went to it again, but it was already UTEP. But I didn't graduate.

FC: For how many years did you, uh...?

M: Two years.

FC: What were you planning...?

M: First I was trying to go for business. I changed my major to linguistics. Then I didn't finish that, so I'm thinking of going back and taking some courses in management.

FC: That would be great. When did you start to work at the Rio Vista center?

M: When I started it was in high school I was going on to college. And due to certain circumstances that my grandparents were going to move to El Paso so I would be close to college. I did not want them to sell their home because they both were used to be living in the county and city life was just not for them. So a cousin of mine told me they had job opening at Rio Vista as a temporary employee. I went and applied and I got the job to be a typist.

FC: How old were you at the time, ma'am?

M: I was 18.

FC: You were 18 years. You applied and was it a part time job?

M: It was a W 80. What they called when they were needed or whatever it was.

FC: What period of the year?

M: It was in, I started in August of '57.

FC: For how many years did you work?

M: I worked on and off 'til 1961, '62. '62 because they closed up in '63 or '64 was the last SOMETHING. They had been contracting since, I think, the 40's.

FC: Since the 40's.

M: I'm not quite sure, but I know that my grandfather had a farm and he had Braceros. I think he had them contracted because they got them from the El Paso Valley, um, what was it. The El Paso Valley, I thought about it yesterday. Cotton Association? That's what that is, farmer, El Paso Valley something. You see what happens is when they would bring the Braceros in and they would go through the

process, they would have them in the SOMETHING area. Then farmers groups would come in like for Pecos and it was an organization, Pecos Association, Farmer's Association, I don't know what the name were. They would bring them in and they would call them on the microphone, on the PA system, they would say, "We need so many men for Pecos. We need so many men for El Paso valley. We need so many men for the SOMETHING in Colorado." All of these men would go over there and there would be people from that association that they would choose their people. "Alright, I want you and you and you." Then they would go to the contracting process. By that time they would get into the buses and everything. They would be contracted to wherever they were told they were gonna go, so that's how we did that.

FC: The contractors. Would you please describe your role as a clerk-typist?

M: As a clerk-typist? What we did there in that department. Well, let me tell you a little bit what they started. What I understand that they started. They came in and they were they would put a powder because a lot of them you know they had traveled so much, sometimes they had SOMETHING or powder you know how they SOMETHING. Anyway, they would spray em and then from there they would go to Public Health. They would get blood tests and they would get an x-ray. From there, they would go on and would get fingerprinted and they would have their pictures taken. From there they would go to contracting which was, what we would do is take their paperwork that they had, the 345 what I was telling you about.

FC: Yes, would you please describe what the 345...?

M: The 345 I understand was a permit they would get in Mexico. They would give it to them in Chihuahua so they could cross the border so they could work out. Once they had that they were here in the center. When we got the contracting, the 345, we'd take the paperwork with all of their information. What we would do is type the contract which would say their name, the beneficiary, and the wife was because sometimes the beneficiary and the wife were not the same...

FC: Were not the same person.

M: A lot of times what they would do, a lot of them would buy their 345's from Mexico. A lot of times, I would get, usually somebody would get one I'd get the other one, it'd be alright. I mean they were better kept off. Sometimes I would get them and I'd say, "What is your name?" And I'd get them and I'd type it and two or three guys come through and then I'd say, "What's your name?" and he'd give me the same name as the one I SOMETHING gotten. I'd say, "Wait a minute. Okay, who's your wife?" Sometimes they wouldn't even think about it, they'd be one right after the other. "Who's your wife?" Well, so and so. "Who are your parent's?" And they were exactly the same. "Where were you born?" And, you know. We had that information with us, their paper with me, but we had to ask them all the information. I would end up, "Okay." And I'd go like, "Wait a minute, you know, they are exactly, which is the right?" Which is the original and which is the one that bought the paper? The SOMETHING or immigration would find out and they would ask them which is which. Sometimes they would let the original, the one that it really was, let him go. Sometimes they would deport both of them. That's the risk they would take. They would just do that. Once that got through the us, through the contracting, through the typing and everything. Then they would go through the department which was also in contracting, had their papers separated and filed and then from there they would go to immigration. Immigration would process them with their paperwork. From there, that was it. They would go to transportation where they would go be transported to buses to wherever they were going.

FC: To the places they were gonna work...

M: They were assigned to them.

FC: I have a question. You said was it the 345 permit the only kind of identification you asked for?

M: That was what we asked for, but we usually asked for other kinds of...

FC: Other papers?

M: But mostly it was the 345 that we would give the information from. That we had taken care of that's what told us more or less all the information we needed. And of course they had gone through the other processors so they had their paperwork.

FC: Was the screening process done inside a building or...?

M: They were done inside a building. You know how in SOMETHING was done in a series of buildings like a horseshoe? They would start as you are facing it, they would start on the right side. They would go into the building on the right and they would start processing and they would around the horseshoe. The last building on this side, on the right side are as you are looking at it on the left side is transportation. By that time, they did not go through the buildings, but they would be processed at transportation and they would be told which buses to take.

FC: The whole process took like a day?

M: It took, well, not a day. It would take maybe an hour for them to go through. An hour and a half maybe to go through. But once they got all their paperwork done and they were at the camp, they would call them and see which ones were going where. SOMETHING.

FC: If that happened and somebody had to stay to pass the night at the Rio Vista...

M: There were times when they spent a week without being contracted.

FC: Oh, okay.

M: What they had, they all wanted to go to Holly Sugar in Colorado because they pay very good. Pecos is the one that paid the least. So nobody...

FC: Nobody liked Pecos?

M: They had to raise candles. They brought the candles. The pay was very low there in Pecos. So nobody wanted to go. They said, "We need a hundred and fifty men for Pecos." You'd get the men who hadn't been there that were not experienced. They had to really kind of push the people to go there. When they said Holly Sugar, everybody ran up there, you know. You could see the whole camp. I'd say, "Oh they're contracting for Holly Sugar because you could see them all running up the..." They had a place there also, well not little, but SOMETHING where they had the food. They would serve them three meals a day.

FC: Oh they served them food?

M: Three meals a day. When they were leaving, they would give them a sack lunch. Most of them were leaving before the buses. You'd see all the little guys with

- chips and little bags of the food, empty bags and you'd say, "God they didn't even leave the camp before they ate their lunch." (Laughs)
- FC: What about the work conditions when you worked at the...were you able to eat at the same place or...?
- M: We would eat there. We usually took our lunch. We usually took our SOMETHING. Or we'd go out to eat. We used to go from there to SOMETHING in Ysleta. We had an hour for lunch and it's terrible because we used to get five or six or seven girls in each car and take off and go to SOMETHING. We had already called our orders in so by the time we got there...
- FC: It was ready?
- M: So we know, we'd just eat, gobble our food, and get back.
- FC: And get back.
- M: Most of the time, we would take our lunch.
- FC: Was it only girls who worked as clerk-typists?
- M: No. Girls and men. There were a lot of men that worked there. But mostly it was girls at contracting. Most of them was girls who knew to type with the clerk-typists working SOMETHING. Our supervisors were mostly retired military that had gotten jobs with the government. They tried to encourage me to get a job with the government. To file, to apply or to go take the test for a full time job with the government. I just procrastinated and said, "No, I don't think I want to stay." Because they would send me not to work there because it was a temporary job. They would send me to work at Fort Bliss or White Sands and all that and I just didn't want to go that far from home. That far for work. After, I worked there in '57, '58, and then in '59 I went to go work for a doctor and I got married in '60. So I SOMETHING '60 and '61 with the children and it was good because you worked so many months on and so many months off. I was one of the fortunate ones when I started working there, it's only a six weeks job. That was it. But I was one of the lucky ones that stayed because when we come back, we had to reprocess them as they come back so that they could go back to Mexico. In other words, we had to account for all the people that left.
- FC: Okay, not only in the country, but also...

- M: We had an officer there from the consulate. The Mexican consulate. He SOMETHING. Of course, we had the officers there who were head of the contracting. But we had to make sure to account for all the people that had gone. If they hadn't got hurt and if it was possible SOMETHING or something, they were accounted for. We had to account for the people that left and make sure that the people that left came back return to Mexico. A contract that they had. I understand when they started in the 40's it was because of the lack of people to work in the fields here. Like I said, my grandfather had a few. I was in school, so that was when I was in junior high school so they started in the 40's.
- FC: Do you remember some of them working on your grandfather's farm?
- M: Oh, yes, I remember them working there. I remember one of them broke his foot and he couldn't work, therefore finally he went back to Mexico. It was a loss for the farmer because the farmer could save nothing. If a man would have to go back to Mexico, he would have to pay again and contract another person. In other words, the farmer would lose what he had paid.
- FC: What about the Bracero that got injured? How did he get back to Mexico?
- M: He got back to Mexico through the government. The United States had insurance on all of them. The farmers all had insurance on the workers. Anytime that they got hurt, they were taken care of completely. They had to have the United States government to Mexico ask that they had to have good housing for them and they had inside plumbing, which a lot of families here in the town did not have inside plumbing but all the Braceros were supposed to have indoor plumbing. They had to have a good home and they had to have something that was pretty decent. Nothing that they would be staying outside in a barn. Their homes had to be...
- FC: Good living conditions.
- M: Good living conditions. They had to make sure that they had plenty of food and they had, if they got hurt, they got hospitalization. Whatever they needed.
- FC: You say most of them were insured. Were there an insurance company at the Rio Vista center or how did they...?
- M: I think it was through the each orders SOMETHING they had insurance. Because I'm sure Rio Vista did, too. But like I said it was through the government, the

Mexican government. We did have a consul there who was always watching and looking out for his people.

FC: Okay, so he was able to be present at any stage of the process?

M: Anything that happened he was right there. What was his name? Joseque was his name. I don't remember what kind of SOMETHING. He was Mexican. SOMETHING.

FC: You said he only worked there for only a certain period of time during the year, but did the center operated year-round?

M: In a way, it did. They had a skeleton crew where they worked. They brought in a few people and they had a few people coming and going. Most of the time, it was when they hired the girls to work or the men to work was when it began the crops to...

FC: Oh, okay, the beginning

M: Yeah, that's when they hired all these people and then they would bring them back, in between while they were working, most of the girls were laid off. I was only of the lucky ones that stayed and was able to do filing and whatever we had to do in between. When they came back, they would call them back because then they would have them all come back and process them all back in. It was just the same thing year round. Different crops at different times. They would have different types of work.

FC: When were the busiest times?

M: For the area there, I think August to September because that's when the cotton was here. I don't remember when Holly Sugar was, but they had, I mean they pick up the beets in Colorado. That was a very busy time.

FC: So mostly for the area it was cotton and then you mentioned the beets. Is there any other crops that you remember?

M: In Pecos valley and El Paso valley, I think it was cotton. They used to be right there on Alameda. Right now I think they have a school there, but they did, they had

FC: SOMETHING?

- M: I don't remember what the name of it was, but I knew it was El Paso Valley Farmers. Mr. Tellez was the one that would contract people for there. You need to remember these names, they made you. Last night I was thinking of all these names.
- FC: (Laughs) That happens quite often. How many applicants would you say were there in a day?
- M: SOMETHING to apply for a job or...?
- FC: I mean to get through the process and to...
- M: To the process? Well, they would bring in sometimes maybe two or three hundred. Four hundred. We had up to five hundred people there at one time. Sometimes maybe even more. Those that were coming in, some were leaving. Sometimes that camp was full. It was so funny because when they came in, a lot of them came in from Oaxaca and places like that, they'd come in with their white clothes. They come in with huaraches or those sandals, different sandals. I mean, they were walking, they used to walk miles from Mexico the SOMETHING side of Mexico and they couldn't take a bus or something. They would travel for months to make it to where they were coming. It was strange because you would see their food and I mean their feet were just SOMETHING from traveling. They were just all SOMETHING and everything. You could see the damages on their feet and everything else. And they'd come back, they'd go to work and they'd come back, and the camp was real quiet when they came. You could hear them talking and everything else. When they came back, I think everybody had bought a radio. They all have them on different stations. The camp, you could hear the whole camp, their radios were on at night. Their radios were on. They all had bought sewing machines, I don't know why, they all bought sewing machines.
- FC: Really? So they can take them back to their...
- M: They bought sewing machines, radios, sewing machines, and bicycles. And cowboy boots. They were all wearing, most of them were wearing boots with jeans and the western shirt and everything else. And you'd look at them and you'd go, "These are the same ones that I brought?" Now they're coming back and look at the way they're dressed. They're dressed...

- FC: They're dressed so different. What about their attitude?
- M: Their attitudes were a bit different. They were kind of a little prouder. First, they'd come in real shy and everything and then when they went back, they were so proud because they had something to take back. But it was strange because I would see sewing machines on top of the buses when they were taking them back to the bridges. The top of the buses were all covered with sewing machines standing with the legs up, the legs up of the sewing machines....
- FC: So was it a very common thing they had sewing machines?
- M: Yes, sewing machines. I don't know, I guess everybody all the ladies know how to sew in Mexico. I mean they'd buy sewing machines. And bicycles, that was one thing that they loved. Bicycles, sewing machines, and the radios. I remember that one time in the afternoon, sometimes we'd work later and I would hear those radios going off on the different stations. My husband used to work there in the garden. Sometimes I'd go there with him or take him lunch or something and you could hear the camp at night and all you could hear was the radios all on different stations. Even if it was midnight and all the radios were going on different stations. They'd lay down there in the camp. They had cots, they had places where they could sleep, but they decided to sleep there all around the camp there so they could have their radios. By that time, when they left, they had a little bag, maybe a little cloth bag with maybe SOMETHING, but it'd be a little maybe eight inches or whatever. They'd come back with suitcases and all these bags. They'd love to buy those shiny suitcases they had. They'd love to buy them. I mean, the shinier, the better. (Laughs) They'd have them there and they'd have all these clothes or whatever that they had bought and they would just lie down there. They had their pillows and everything, blankets, they bought a lot of blankets.
- FC: In the camp, they only had small bags, but they were able to keep their belongings?
- M: Very minimal whatever they had. Like I said, they were very very poor people. There were several in there who were doing it graduate students and writers that would come in through it so that they could write about the history of the story. A

lot of college students so that they could experience what the Braceros would experience.

FC: Of course, Mexican college students, right?

M: Yes. You could see them. You could tell them right away the difference in the people. "Are you a student or something?" They'd say, "Why yes, how could you tell?" "Because, your demeanor is different." Most of the people from Oaxaca speak their own language, their own dialect. You begin to, at first, you should have seen me, I was a disaster. To listen to what they were trying to tell me, not in their language, but in the dialect that they use to understand themselves. They had the little sound in it and I couldn't understand what they were trying to say. It was difficult. Then after awhile you could pick up their little sound and you would begin to understand it. I was very fortunate because I was raised by my grandparents and they were from deep into the interior of Mexico. My grandfather was from Jalisco and I grew up fluent in Spanish. So for me, it was easy to talk to the SOMETHING or the consul because of the Spanish that they spoke. I was able to pick up the dialect because having spoken the Spanish the way that I did, it was easier. A lot of girls had a lot of problems. They could not even understand the consul. They used to tell me, "How come you understand him? Is he speaking Spanish?" I said, "Well, you don't understand his Spanish." Of course, they had more problems...

FC: You learned proper Spanish.

M: They had problems listening to a film because of the dialect that they speak. You pick up a few words. A lot of them were from Oaxaca. Chihuahua and Mexico, but we had a lot of them from Oaxaca. They walked, I'm telling you, they walked from SOMETHING from Yucatan coming in and that's way down there.

FC: So they walked all the way through SOMETHING.

M: Most of time they walked. They would get rides with people. They didn't have any money, so they would SOMETHING whatever. They brought their money to pay because they had to pay so much to get across. They didn't have to, but in order to get there faster they would...

FC: Oh, okay, like a fee.

M: That money. The way somebody would take their money and say, "Hey, I can take you there faster, but you pay me." They were paying SOMETHING to get there faster. Some of them would never get across and they'd have to go back to Juarez or if they were from Chihuahua or wherever they'd get to. They could not make it across. They had filled their quota and so they didn't need the others. They had to make their way back. I felt sorry for them because they didn't have any money or anyway to get back. They had their hardships like anything else. Some places didn't treat them as good as others. They had their hardships. But they had their good jobs and they were able to take some money back home. Unfortunately, I understand they would take some money and ask for some money going back across. It's just a series of, just the same thing that's happened for years and years and years. They pay to get wherever you have to go. Unfortunately, that's it.

FC: What was the age of the majority of the Braceros that you had working?

M: Most of the Braceros, I think, in the 30's, late 20's, 30's, 40's. Some of them were older, some of them were younger. Most of them had families.

FC: Mostly families? So they usually came in families or...?

M: They came in groups, all the men come in to work. They were all compadres they all knew each other from one area. Then, they were from another area. Some of them came alone. I used to try to talk to them and make them feel at ease because they were very tense when they get up to contracting. They see all these typewriters, all these girls and trying to type. They'd have to go through a series of questions. What they would do is get very nervous and intimidated. I tried to talk to them and say, "How long has it been since you left home?" Ask them questions that they would relax. I would try to make it a point to do that. They would talk to me and tell me some of their stories.

FC: Really?

M: Some were very interesting and some would say, "Well, I don't like to talk about it." Or, "I don't want you to know anything." I didn't press, but most of them, I'd say 99% of them wanted to say something. To share something about their. They were excited that somebody cared SOMETHING.

FC: Exactly. It gives me the impression that it was the whole process you feel like dehumanizing to see all these people and everything. So somebody really cares about you...

M: Somebody cares. Somebody is trying to make me feel good. I'm in a different country. I'm in a foreign country and I don't know what to expect. You know, somebody to talk to and whatever. When I was in the other office, when I was not in typing, when I was processing and just separating the contracting papers, for contracting I think it was four or five papers, four or five, and you would have the carbon in between...

FC: Oh, okay, so you have to...

M: Separate those and we didn't have the carbon paper, we had carbons in between...

FC: Oh, you mean SOMETHING...

M: Yes, so you can imagine what our hands looked like. We had to separate them and then take the copy one of them they took off, we saved a copy from there and then they would go to the next department, they'd take another copy.

FC: Oh, okay, so they were able to keep a copy a copy of their contracts.

M: Yes, the 345 they left with us and we'd file those. Then they'd go on to the immigration and they would take another copy, they would process something else. They would do another type of processing and process them to immigration to whatever they had to do. Then they would go on to contracting, I mean, to transportation and then from there...

FC: SOMETHING. So you had all these different...

M: Different papers would go to different places.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE ONE

FC: Do you remember some of the stories they used to tell you? What did they want to tell you mostly, like about their families or...?

M: They talked about their families or they'd talk about far they had traveled. I remember one time I was typing a contract for one of them. And like I said, they're tired, they come many times without food for days or whatever. I

remember I was typing this contract and we were sitting up high and the typewriters would come up in front of us for a certain point. I was typing and asking questions and all of a sudden I looked down and asked him a question and he wasn't there anymore. It was the first time I had done anything, 18 you know you're young and don't understand. All of a sudden, here I am and I said, "What happened, where did he go?" I see all the rest of them moving on. I did not understand. The man had passed out. Right there. Fainted right there in front of me.

FC: Right in front of the typewriter? So you were not able to see because it was...

M: They had us on high. They had a SOMETHING that we had to go on high and the typewriter was sitting up high to where we were almost to their faces. We were not looking up at them. We were looking straight ahead. Or down because some of them were real short. I was typing, I remember I was going full blast and I look down at 345 and I asked him a question and he wasn't there anymore. What happened to you and suddenly he was gone. "Where did go?" Everybody says he passed out, he fainted right there. After that, I realized it wasn't an everybody deal, but it was not uncommon to see somebody pass out. They hadn't eaten in a long time. And you have all these people crowding and lack of oxygen and whatever and they're all like that. They hadn't had a bath, I guess, in two or three weeks, so that humor was just terrible. And you'd have them all in one building and...

FC: SOMETHING where it's hot.

M: I guess that's where they had us up high, so we wouldn't be on that level. When we get to 345, we were at that level, we were there at the camp and we would bring them in. That was before they checked them. A lot of them had tuberculosis and had to be returned. A lot of them had different things and had to be returned. But, we had already processed them after they find out they had tuberculosis, by the time, they go through the whole line then they found out they had it.

FC: Oh, yeah, because it took a while...

M: So we worked with them. We were in constant contact with them.

FC: You never got...

M: We never did

FC: Shots?

M: We never did. None of us. Well, I got pneumonia the second year I worked there. I didn't know I had bronchial pneumonia. I kept working and I just didn't talk. After the contract season was over, I went to my doctor and he said, "You had bronchial pneumonia while you were there."

FC: You worked with...?

M: I kept on working. I used to take, the girls used to laugh and say, "How in the world can you eat five, six sandwiches and not," And, for lunch.

FC: Really? For lunch?

M: I would get the jalapenos and eat them like they were nothing, like they were a piece of tomato or something. They'd say, "Aren't they..." Maybe that's what's helped me because I had so much fever and the jalapeno helped me to keep it down.

FC: You never noticed that that might be because of...?

M: I just couldn't breathe, I just didn't talk and I had trouble breathing. I just didn't want to quit work. And they used to say, "Take a couple of days off. You've got a real bad cold." "No, I don't." I wanted to keep on working. I loved to work.

FC: Was it a very common thing that they have to wear SOMETHING.

M: SOMETHING.

FC: Do you think that they were aware that they have this...

M: They were aware, but they never thought anything about it, I guess. They went through and we were aware that a lot of them were sick and we didn't know what they had. Bronchitis, tuberculosis, VD. We didn't, we didn't, it wasn't anything that we just frowned at, I mean it was people that we were processing. Sometimes SOMETHING. And they would come from Public Health and pick him up and say, "I'm taking him." And I'd say, "What's the matter?" They'd go and I'd go, "Ohhh" because I felt bad not only because of the illness, but because they were going to be returned to Mexico. They were returned and they were given medical care. They were told the Mexican government to give them medical care. They would be sent to their homes and God only knows what. They didn't have the

opportunity to work. To me, that was sad. SOMETHING. I used to take those people who were going across very much at heart. To me, it was not a group of people, it was individual. An individual. I used to feel bad for em. Some would say, "I have eight kids and I came because we just don't have any food." And I would think, eight kids. First of all SOMETHING. They would say, "I don't know which one to put." I said, "Are you married SOMETHING?" "Oh, no I just live with two or three women and that's...."

FC: Oh, really? So they didn't know which one to put.

M: One time this man came. I said, "Okay, what is your wife's name?" He said, "Well, uh, it's so and so." I said, "Your beneficiary is your wife?" "Oh, no, no, it's my lover. Her name is..." (Laughs)

FC: (Laughs) So he had a different SOMETHING. That's funny.

M: I had two guys that had the same lover. They both wanted to be... They had insurance...

FC: Really? But they were aware of the fact they had...?

M: They weren't aware of it, but they became aware of it while they were there. I went like, "You're leaving it to her? But he just left it to her." "Oh, he did?" I said, "Well," I said Oh, my God.

FC: Really? Oh, God... (Laughs)

M: (Laughs)

FC: You know that

M: My querida. I go like, "Excuse me?" I said, "Is this your wife?" "No, my querida. I already told her that if something happens to me, she gets my insurance."

FC: Wife and kids...

M: What about your wife and the kids? "Oh, no, it's okay. But I promised my lover that I would leave her this." (Laughs)

FC: I can't believe that.

M: These are the stories that I used to SOMETHING.

FC: See? Wow?

- M: Very interesting, but it's one of a kind. You look for that and you wonder, like, some of the work hard and my wife, my mom. Some of them had a wife, but they left everything to their...
- FC: To their mom.
- M: If anything happen to me, I want everything to my mom. Some of them weren't married, they'd say, my mom is my beneficiary. My mom this and that. Stuff like that. Some of them were SOMETHING
- FC: They were able to put whoever they wanted?
- M: Oh, yes. Beneficiary they could put their dad, their mom, their neighbor or somebody put their neighbor. They didn't have family, so they put their neighbor or their compadre or camadre or godson. Whatever they would want. They weren't required to put anybody. Even though they said, "My wife and so and so" or "I don't have a wife or something, I want to leave this to my niece." If something happened to them.
- FC: What about the SOMETHING that came together or the group of friends. Were they able to get a contract together?
- M: Sometimes, they tried. There were times they were separated because they had a quota of people and they couldn't take. "Please take my compadre." "You know, I'm sorry, we already have our quota." Sometimes, somebody would say, "Well, I'm not part of that group. I'm not the family. Let him go." Once in awhile, you'd hear about that. I don't know how often it happened because I wasn't out there unless it was SOMETHING night. Some of the times they were separated. They'd go to different places. They'd get together when they got back. "Oh, SOMETHING." They went to separate places SOMETHING. The food wasn't bad they gave them because we ate the same food they were given all the time.
- FC: Was it good?
- M: It was good food. It wasn't fantastic food, but it was something to...a lot of them complained that it was garbage, but it wasn't. A lot of the employees would sit down and eat it. They'd love the employees to sit down and eat it. I'm sure there was sometimes there were two hundred of us working there.
- FC: Two hundred employees?

M: At times there was.

FC: Really?

M: Hmm-mmm. At times there were a lot of employees. When we were processing or contracting a loan, we had over 50 girls. Well over 50.

FC: Over 50 girls?

M: SOMETHING

FC: How were the SOMETHING where you worked at? The offices that you worked at? Like, the contracting, you said you were 'up high' so...

M: They were long buildings and if you see them, they were just high like empty buildings as long like a warehouse not like a SOMETHING. They would put the stands there for the clipboard where you could go up there. They had your chairs and then we had like a desk type, long desk type from one end to the other where they would have all the typewriters, one next to another. The next building was still contracting and that's where we sorted out the paperwork. Some of the girls, what they did was put the forms together and put the carbons in there. So, it was different, different things. We had two buildings for contracting. They go from inside one building to the next. Look at the SOMETHING, they're connected, but there was a space in between them I'd say about maybe four, five feet and they would go from building to the other.

FC: To the other.

M: Four doors.

FC: And you said that besides typing the contracts, you also had to separate the papers and file them.

M: You separate the filing where you put the 345's some other place. Mostly we did the 345's when they would leave. Then we'd have time to put them altogether and whatever. We'd find out a lot of things while we were filing. We find out somebody had the same name or something.

FC: Then someone else? Oh, that's why...

M: We'd find out sometimes in the line. Sometimes we'd find out after they'd gone out. We'd find out through the cards that SOMETHING. It was interesting job.

Very interesting. It was my first job and when you you're young, anything is, I was excited because I had never worked outside the home.

FC: That was your first job?

M: Yes. I had worked at the farm. My grandfather had a farm. I had worked there since I was nine years old. Then we had a grocery store, which is that building next to us. I worked there at the grocery store and stuff. It was all family business. I had never worked outside.

FC: It's like your first real life...(Laughs)

M: My grandparents were very strict, so they didn't let me go out at all. Being able to go to work, to me, was getting away from my parents and grandparents and going to work. Sometimes, we'd get out late, so what my grandparents used to do is park outside and wait for me until I got out of work.

FC: Oh, so they were the ones to take you and they would pick you up?

M: They would sit there for two or three hours in the car and wait for me until I got out because they didn't want me to drive.

FC: Really?

M: Sometimes I didn't get out until 11 o'clock when we were processing Braceros.

FC: And they wait for you?

M: I'd go in at 6 o'clock in the morning and didn't get out until 11 o'clock.

FC: So you had to finish, I mean if you have two hundred people, you had to finish processing all those people?

M: We had time to process the Braceros in a certain time. But then we volunteered. They'd say, "How many of you would volunteer to stay over and do the 345's because we're bringing people in from Chihuahua." So, I would be the person to jump up and say, "I'll stay until we finish." Sometimes we didn't finish until about 11. I'd be coming home about 11, 11:30. Being 18 years old and an only child and a grandchild as spoiled as I was. (Laughs)

FC: (Laughs) They took very good care of you.

M: Yeah, I was very, they kept, supposed to be real...SOMETHING.

FC: Were you able to make any friendships with the other girls?

M: Oh, yes. And there were a lot of girls from here that were working there.

FC: Oh, from the same area?

M: Mmm-hmm. There was a lot of them. I met a lot girls from El Paso, from different areas, Socorro. As a matter of fact, after I met some girls from Socorro, we used to SOMETHING because they didn't have a car, I'd pick them up or take them home. Or from San Eli or you know. I'd get to meet a lot of the girls I didn't even know we lived very close. I got to meet a lot of girls from El Paso, too. We kept our friendships through the years. Some of them I still talk to, some of them I still remember. We kept, like I said, I went back after I got married and after I had my kids, I went back as a temporary, but then I worked for transportation.

FC: What year was that? When you came back?

M: The last year I worked there was '61, '6...

FC: So you were married when you...?

M: When I came back. The office called me back and I worked there in transportation and just doing the paperwork, just trying to get the people out. Trying to get them on the buses. I helped contracting, I mean I helped immigration. Sometimes they ran short of people and I'd go in help them. I'd always the type of person when they needed something, "I'll help. I'll stay and help."

FC: You always volunteered.

M: I always volunteered. It always kept me away from home, so I would volunteer (Laughs). I used to come home, I didn't go out. I mean, my grandparents...

FC: No? Really?

M: Before I got married, my husband came in and asked my grandparents if he could take me to the movies and my grandfather told him flatly, "The day you take her out of this church is you take her SOMETHING." That was the way it was. You just didn't do that then.

FC: You mentioned that your husband worked as a guard at the Rio Vista center. Was he the one...?

M: SOMETHING.

FC: You met him there?

M: No. We met in school. I knew him since we were kids. SOMETHING had been here for years and years.

FC: And even though your grandparents know him for a long long time...

M: It didn't matter. He was the neighbor and...

FC: There was no difference.

M: No, no.

FC: Because it's not like he was a stanger?

M: He was no stranger. His dad would come over and talk to my grandfather and SOMETHING. He came SOMETHING and my grandfather would send SOMETHING.

FC: Really?

M: He wanted to know exactly what we were talking about. Can you believe it?

FC: SOMETHING you did that.

M: SOMETHING when I got married. (Laughs)

FC: (Laughs) You said you mentioned that some of the employers would come personally to the reception center to pick up, like "I need fifty and..."

M: Yes, that was the only way they could get...

FC: Okay, they had to go.

M: The association, the different associations would have to go to the camp and say, "I need so many people..." and they would have to get them there and pick them up from there. The El Paso Valley Association was one.

FC: That's the same of a SOMETHING. So they have different associations...

M: They had the one here, they got the one from Pecos, they got two or three from Holly Sugar, they would send representatives from Holly Sugar. They had other places, I don't remember what they were. The biggest ones were the ones from Pecos where they pick up the cantaloupes. SOMETHING. And the El Paso Valley Association.

FC: I have a question. When, let's say a Bracero pass through the reception center and finish his contract, then on his way back he, how you say, closed his contract or whatever, what if he wanted to come back to the United States? Did he...?

M: No, he had to go back.

FC: He had to go back.

M: He had to go back.

FC: If you wanted to return to sign another contract, let's say did he have to pass through, let's say, the processing center...

M: Here?

FC: Yes.

M: Yes.

FC: Oh, he...

M: Yes, he had to go through the whole process again.

FC: To go through the whole process again.

M: A lot of times they had cards that I noticed it that they had been here for three or four years.

FC: So you did have people come back?

M: Yes. Some people did come back. Not that many, but some people did come back.

FC: What were your normal hours working there?

M: From 8 to 5.

FC: From 8 to 5. And one hour lunch, you said.

M: One hour for lunch. It was Monday through Friday.

FC: Monday through Friday.

M: Most of the time. Sometimes when it was heavy when we had to work with the Braceros, when we had the contracting the season...

FC: Oh, okay the seasons.

M: Then you worked seven days a week.

FC: Because there were many Braceros...

M: Yes. I worked the first time for six weeks without a rest, without a single day.

FC: Six weeks?

M: With no days off.

FC: But they did pay you overtime, right?

M: Yes.

FC: And they pay you with check?

M: Yes, they'd send a check. They would send it to me. I think in the mail. No, they would give it to me there. But it was the government check.

FC: Government check. Do you remember how much?

M: I worked there for a year and we were making \$SOMETHING or something an hour.

FC: They pay you how often, weekly, bi-weekly?

M: Bi-monthly.

FC: Bi-monthly. Is there any particular incident that stands out in your mind while working there in the Rio Vista center?

M: No, not really. Other than when I got sick and I was SOMETHING

FC: Other than that? (Laughs)

M: The people that I was talking to. No, not really. Most of the girls got along real good. I didn't have any problems with the girls. I had two ladies who adopted me.

FC: Really?

M: They were like my mother so they were older ladies that had worked there for a long time. They both wanted to help me. Then I had a SOMETHING there and he and his wife wanted to adopt me, so SOMETHING. They used to call me their child and I used to call them Mom and Dad.

FC: That's very nice.

M: SOMETHING and word got out...

FC: That anybody else...

M: I had no problems. I even used to go out into the main office and help them a lot of times. To do typing they would call me to the front. They treated me real nice. I don't have any complaints about the way they treated me. They were very very nice. No problems. And like I said, there are several girls that are still here that worked there. There are quite a few in Clint and there's SOMETHING in San Elizario. And Socorro, they've moved away. I know several in El Paso, one of them was the wife of one of the fireman in the El Paso SOMETHING. She's got Alzheimer's now, but SOMETHING because I knew her real well. She got to be a real good friend of mine. She's older than me. They kind of took over me. They just kind of, I guess when they found out I didn't have a mother, for some reason, they just kind of adopted me. Looked after me or whatever. It was real nice. I had a good time. I enjoyed it.

FC: That's good. So it was a great work environment?

M: I liked it. It was hard, it was different. It was not a, would you say, clean...

FC: Exactly.

M: a lot of the work with all those people. It was fun. It was not an office job per se, but I would dress up because I felt that at least they deserved that.

FC: Oh, that's very nice.

M: Instead of not going in jeans or whatever. My grandfather didn't let me wear pants, so, I never...

FC: Oh, you were not allowed.

M: I would always wear my dress and heels and everything.

FC: Oh, really, so it was like...

M: I would be standing there sometimes all day. But it didn't matter. At least, you know...

FC: SOMETHING you worked there in high heels and dresses.

M: I liked it.

FC: That's good. SOMETHING the ladies. Some seem very nice dressed.

M: One of them is in pants. The other is in a dress. One of them is wearing pants, but I never did. The one on the left is wearing a long dress I think. The dresses were long at that time.

FC: Oh, you were wearing long dresses?

M: Well, it was the fifties...

FC: Oh, yes.

M: They were down here and everything else. That could be SOMEBODY on the right. That could be Jamie Munoz on the left.

FC: On the left?

M: But I'm not quite sure. It's either Mary Torres or Maggie Manago. That SOMETHING that I was telling you about.

FC: SOMETHING.

M: That's when we had the tables. No, they were not doing the 345's SOMETHING. This would have been before my time. I don't know what they were doing. I think that's who they are. That was before my time.

FC: Did you have the Braceros say any compliments to the girls? The typing girls?
You know...?

M: SOMETHING

FC: Yes, if there were already...

M: All they wanted to do was get through. All they wanted to do was get out of there. They were scared, they were, most of them were nervous. They didn't know what the next building was going to bring. What they were going to ask them. You better get through or if you were gonna get stopped. They were very nervous. They were very timid. Most of them were very timid. Most of the people who came, you have to realize, were from very poor neighborhoods. They were very poor people who SOMETHING themselves to come work, to make it to the border cities to find a job.

FC: What do you feel were the advantages and disadvantages of the Braceros program?

M: The advantages were that they were able to raise the crops as they needed. The farmers were able to raise their crops because, like I said, there was several wars and several reasons why the men had to leave. A lot of the men did not want to work in the fields or whatever. There were some disadvantages. Like I said, a lot of them quit work or didn't want to work and they'd take off and go back to Mexico. There was nothing the farmer could do to hold him. There was no...the farmer was the one to lose. Like I said I know because of what happened to my grandfather. He just, once he got sick and...They would get sick for some reasons, they would get hurt for some reasons that were. Things like the breaking of SOMETHING. So, they put themselves in harms way. So that was a lot of SOMETHING. But a lot of times when they said they were going up a hill to Colorado to SOMETHING. One of the one's got smart and he yelled fired. The buses were going at 55, 60 miles an hour and you yell fire, most of them were asleep at the back of the bus. They opened the door, when they opened the door to the back to exit, they didn't realize that the bus was going at full speed and there was four or five of them that got killed. Things like that happen. But these are the things that you don't, you hear about them, but they weren't

SOMETHING. Like I said, that was it. There was a bunch of advantages. I saw some disadvantages for them to coming. For them, really because they had the chance, like they said SOMETHING...

FC: SOMETHING

M: They gonna get contracted, they gonna be sent back to Mexico, they are healthy enough to stay or their not or whatever. They had to watch their things very closely because, you know, as poor people when they came back, they had to watch everything because somebody else would...

FC: Take it.

M: The other person...SOMETHING. (Laughs)

FC: (Laughs)

M: Just like anything, you have a group of people who are trying to, who are very poor and always trying to make a little bit from somebody else. SOMETHING. I think the people that came, most of them had a good experience. Some of them didn't, some of them, like I said, they went to different farms where they were mistreated and stuff. The government intervened, the Mexican government intervened. But, there was good treatment and there was bad treatment.

FC: Do you think the Bracero program should be revived?

M: I don't see it coming back because now they've been replaced by the equipment, by the machinery and stuff. It's not the same as it used to be. It was funny because when we had the farm, they used to walk from one place to another. As long as they carried a shovel or an implement, the Border Patrol wouldn't get them, but as long as they didn't. So on Sundays, you'd see them all dressed up and carrying the shovel from one place to another.

FC: (Laughs)

M: SOMETHING. It was funny because they're all dressed up to go visit somebody else and then they have the shovel. As long as they had it, they were SOMETHING.

FC: That was it.

M: It's, like I said, I worked on the farm, I knew the farm life because of my dad having a farm. When I worked there I learned their side of life. SOMETHING. I

was able to, that was before I worked with them that I realized that we had them. Because my dad sold the farm in '53, so, by that time I didn't see them until I went to work and then I realized the other side of SOMETHING. It was really interesting.

FC: Is there any final comment you would like to make? Any additional...?

M: Like I said, I'm very sorry I don't have the pictures. If I can get them separated because they got stuck, but I do have some photographs that we took there. It would be great if you could get a group of people that worked there and maybe we can all have a reminder whose each other to remember...

FC: The stories.

M: I can give you the name of some people.

FC: That would be very...

M: In Clint and in San Elizario that worked there. Some of them worked only one season or where it was just the six weeks, but some of them were there for a long time. I know a lady there that worked as the government employee and she worked there for a long time. She was our office manager.

FC: What is her name?

M: Her name is Cici. It was Apodaca, it's Brewster now. She's the wife of one of the counselorman for Socorro. Cici Brewster.

FC: I would like to thank you very much.

M: Thank you for coming. I hope I've given you enough...

FC: Oh, no, thank you very much.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW