

Translation of interview

This is an interview with Roberto Martínez Cordero on November 12, 2008 in Santa Paula, California. The interviewer is Amy Taylor and this interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project.

For starters, where and when were you born?

-I was born in Tepic, Nayarit, on May 16, 1940.

And, can you talk to me about your family and the place where you lived?

-Well, it was a classic big family; uh...we were 12 children in all from my dad and my mom. Um...a big family, what more you know, maybe you can ask questions, I don't know....

Um...well where do they live now? You told me you had 12 brothers and sisters, right? And, where do they live now?

-Well, all of us are old now. They are married; they have children, even grandchildren, all of them, um...in Tepic uh...I have half-brothers from my dad's side; my mom died and my dad got remarried two times, he died and his last few children live in Tepic. We are eight altogether...my dad had 19 children with two different wives, not at one time though, different times.

Did you go to school, and where?

-I went to school up until 6th grade in Tepic. Then I grew up and I decided to come to Ventura and I came to the United States, I was contracted as a bracero during two different seasons and then um...the last time I saved money and um...I went through the process to get my green card, as they call it. And from there I came over here, where I met who now is my wife, we got married, and...we've been married...since 74, we have been married for 44 years, with three children. And...four grandchildren, uh...seven grandchildren.

Um...then um...did you have a job in, while you attended school in México?

-Yeah, during the last few years, or better said, after finishing school, I worked in a company that processed tobacco...that also passed it through the same state it was in, Nayarit, and um...from there I decided to come over here, so I signed up to be a bracero during two different seasons.

Can you talk to me about how you entered into...the Bracero Program?

-Yes, well um...basically I was in Tijuana, with one of my sisters, and work was very scarce, in all of México. I um, I entered in the Bracero Program and from there I went to the employment bureau in Tijuana, and um, they sent me to Empalme, where they made the contracts for the braceros, and that is how I started. I worked that first season and then it ended, I went back to México and then I

came back again for a second season and um...from there I decided to immigrate legally. I achieved that in a few years, I was there a year or two.

And um...can you describe to me the hiring process?

-One, one fills out the application in the employment bureau and their, well some government offices. They make a list and they send them to Empalme, and from Empalme they bring them to the place where they will be hired. And um...everyday they called from the lists of the people that they were going to hire, and um...from there, the person that was called would go through the whole process and um...they would transport them to the border, depending on the place where they were going to work; they had me working in Arizona the first, the first season.

Um...was there a physical exam that you had to pass to enter the program?

-Yeah, yeah they give you a, I would say fast, a light physical exam um...and they get your information, they check your hands to see if they had calluses...and um, we could say that it's something very quick, fast, it's just to make sure one doesn't have hernias or that there weren't any men who were unable to work physically.

So then, you told me you traveled here by train, right?

-Uh huh...up until the border...

And where did you cross the border?

-Let me think...I can't remember very well if it was Mexicali or San Luis Río Colorado...it was probably could have been, it was Mexicali, yeah. From there, they would go to another location where they do another physical exam; they draw blood, things like that.

What happened after you had finished the process and you received your work permit?

-They take you to the place where you are going to work. There was like a center for...people, and from that center they sent you to the places where you will be staying, to the ranches, where one would be working.

How many years did you officially work as a bracero?

-It wasn't more than a year; the first season was a few months maybe 6, 8 months. The first time...they had me working in, around Yuma, Arizona. It was a small town called La Mesa.

And was this the only place that you worked at as a bracero?

-The first time, yes, in a few different ranches, in a few different places. But they take you from the place where you are staying...everyday, everyday, um...until the work is finished and they stay, uh they move to a place where there is still whatever kind of work to be done. For example things like, um cotton, lemons mainly, and um everyone works with oranges, but mainly lemons and then when the work was done I went to another field where they had carrots and other things, vegetables that are ready during winter.

Um...and about how many braceros in total worked with you?

-In the first camp I was in there was I think...around 100, 200 people, doing different jobs...and then the season ended, summer, which was mainly lemons I would say. Those who wanted to stay, we went to another camp where there was like 50, 100 people, um picking carrots, eh vegetables that are ready during winter. When work became scarce, we didn't work daily; we worked when they had something for us to do. Sometimes when we didn't work all day we weren't making any money, just enough to buy food. Well, from there I decided to end my contract and they took us back to the border and um...I waited till the next year, the next contract.

And, how were your bosses towards you?

-Generally speaking, they were good, the companies, and all the food was really tasty. I was telling my wife that I was at one place where once a week we ate fried chicken, very tasty. If we wanted to have seconds, they would let us, yeah, very tasty. And it seemed as if the chickens were the size of a turkey. (laughs) I guessed during that time they were using the, that type of food, steroids, that make the animals get very big. But very tasty, very good. I had one caretaker that wasn't very good in counting and he took out, he made a lot of errors in um, counting the drawers, I would check them and tell him what he did wrong, before they would come around and check, then he banned us from looking at his documents anymore. There are always people that aren't very good at giving out the checks or doing their job. That was the only incident that was a little unfair, because I always wanted to fix the problems before they handed out the checks. But he was a little jealous of the job, he didn't like it when we looked through his stuff and he told us not to. But generally speaking, they were always...they treated us well; they gave us enough food and everything.

And, did you make any friends?

-With the locals?

With your co-workers...

-Yes, yes...

And are you still in contact with any of them?

-No, no um I was friends with them when we were, I was very young, I was 18,19 years old, I found myself with 2 guys, when we weren't working, we would go out, go for walks...but no, I don't have, I didn't have a long-lasting friendship, just temporary.

Did the Mexican authorities...ever come to the places where you worked?

-No, no um the second place I worked at, in the second camp, it was the beginning of winter and it was a little cold, I remember that there was, that American inspectors came...to check the heaters that we had um...it was really cold and I grabbed an overcoat, there was very little people, because I was a little, so there was a mattress from another bed that I used to put on top of me, because it was so cold. After the American inspectors came, they put in electric heaters that give off air. One would think that the air is hot, but when the inspectors weren't there, they didn't turn on the heater at a pleasing temperature. So it was basically like a fan and instead of feeling warm, one got used to the cold because it was basically like having a fan. But besides that, well like...a Mexican who doesn't know much doesn't...um they don't complain or anything because that's just how things were, cold, with the heater working as a fan (laughs), a little bit uncomfortable. But nothing bad, nothing excessive.

And, how did you communicate with your family, through letters...?

-Through letters, yeah. It was a rare thing to use the phone.

And, did you ever go to México to visit your family?

-Yeah, yeah um, I had family in Tijuana and I was in um, Yuma, Arizona, which takes like two hours to get to on bus, so during the weekends, I went a few times to visit them.

And, how many days out of the week and hours out of the day did you work?

-We worked um, the season well, let's say in the summer, picking lemons, and citrus fruits we worked everyday, 40 hours a week. Sometimes we would work Saturdays when they needed the fruit, but generally not, just 40 hours a week. We would have Saturdays and Sundays off. We had a very pleasing caretaker and one time we asked him for a paper of some sort in order to be able to cross the border and if he would let us off near the border it took like one hour walking to get from the border of the camp to the Mexican border, which was San Luis Río Colorado it takes about an hour, then we asked for some kind of document, he goes you know what, there won't be a problem, just tell them that you work for, he didn't tell us his name, he said they all know me over there, they won't have a problem, he was just playing around. We started to laugh. They always said ridiculous things, that type of man. Very nice people, good people. We were able to cross the border with an identification card we had from being a bracero. But we weren't very sure of how to cross the border. We didn't need a special document. We had our identification cards from being braceros and with that we were able to cross the border.

And, can you describe to me the place where you lived, how was it furnished, where did you sleep, did you take showers?

-We had bunk beds. Small for one person, I mean two people but um, the size was for...five beds, but for two people, right? Comfortable; they had enough blankets and everything. We had a very good heater also, central. When the season ended we left, I left to another camp, it was cold there. And only when the inspectors came they turned on the heater (we laugh). But whatever happened we would get used to it.

And in regards to your salary, how much did they pay you?

-I would guess they paid us the minimum legal percentage, for all places, for everybody. They paid us the minimum wage, for sometime when we started, or rather while we were learning the job and then once we had learned the skill, we worked under a contract for which ever job one did. But we earned good money. Yeah, they paid well; I never looked at the wages as a form of abuse. Everything was legal, except for the guy that didn't know how to cash checks. (Laughs) And...

(His wife)-So how much did they pay?

-Uh...by the house I don't remember. If it had been, I'm sure it was less than one dollar, because um, everything after was \$.62, there were places where they paid one dollar. And that was like in 59. If it had been a little more than one hour but, it was all legal. And then once we were paid through a contract we got paid more than that. We were paid well. Not a lot of money, but for an illegal, it was a lot.

What did you do with your money?

-Well, I just spent it; I was only 19 years old. We went to the border and we got drunk, no (laughs). Um...I never got drunk because I have never liked to, not even when I was a teenager. But we did go to the cantinas, and we just hung out and spent the money, nothing else.

You never sent money to your family?

-No, I was single, yeah, during the next contract...

(His wife)-To you parents...

-I always sent a little bit to my dad. Um...during the second contract, I decided to immigrate, so I started to save my money and I entrusted some with one of my brothers so that he could start um...the application process for immigration.

Um...so then there was never a problem receiving your pay?

-No, no um, the mail has always been very secure, here in the United States.

Was there ever a problem with you job?

-No. No, I've always been lucky in life, I was always with respectable people, the food was always tasty, but there were always other co-workers that would complain about the food, but I don't know why, because they always gave us plenty and it was always very tasty.

Did they complain about other things at work or just about the food?

-The only ones that did complain, it was about the food. They didn't like it, but...I don't know why. The food was very tasty, cooked very well and there was always enough. There was always enough for whoever wanted seconds.

And, if there was an accident or an illness, what would happen?

-Uh, there was one time when they had to take me to the doctor. Um, I think I hurt a nerve in my leg or something. They brought me to the doctor and they forgot to come back for me. I waited, and waited, and waited, and well they didn't come for me and it was already late. So I asked one of the nurses if they knew anything about them. She said, "no, I don't know"; then I asked where I would be able to grab a taxi, so they called a taxi for me. I left in the taxi to take me back to the camp because there was no other way I could find a place to sleep (laughs). What happened was they forgot to send someone to come and get me, or they probably weren't used to having to pick someone up. It was pretty close to the camp. But I had to pay for the taxi to get back. It was a little nerve-racking for me being in a place, alone, where I didn't know anyone, and I didn't speak the language.

What did you do on your days off?

-Well um, when I started working and receiving money we went to the border, San Luis Río Colorado, it took one hour to get there by car, so we went to hang out, passed the day there. Sometimes we went all the way to Mexicali and one time, a few times I went to Tijuana, to visit Juan, and Teresa, and spend time over there.

They didn't have movies? What did you do for fun? Sports?

-Yes, they had um...in Summerton, the name of the town, they had a movie theatre in Spanish. Um...sometimes we went to Yuma, Arizona but it was a little further away, and there was less things to do, the town was bigger, but there were fewer things for a Mexican to do. I also told my wife that...because we were agricultural workers...we walked. The majority of Mexicans like to walk. We

went walking from one town to the next, and the Americans would stop for us and give us rides, they would ask us where we were going and they would take us there, very friendly. Something you don't see nowadays. Speaking of discrimination...the Americans, the American families would stop and pick us up if we were walking. When we crossed the border, the American immigrants um, when they would return home they would start to talk to us in Spanish, they loved to talk about bulls, bullfighting, things like that. They were practicing the only Spanish that they knew, and when they would get tired of talking or something, they would find someone to give us a ride back home. They would ask to those that were going to cross the border where they were going and if there was someone that was going close to where our camp was, they would tell that person to give us a ride. Very, very good memories of the people, of Americans and everyone.

Did you celebrate Christmas, or Holy Week?

-My contracts were never during Christmas. By that time my job had ended, there was barely any work and I left that year. And the second time I worked during the summer. I worked in um, Yuba City.

Was there a church, near the town?

-There might have been but I never went to church, I never really liked going to church, nor did I know anyone who went. There were a lot of Catholics but I don't remember if any of them ever went to a church.

Ok, so, you told me that, yes, you went back to México and then later you came back to the United States, right?

-Yes, for another season.

And, what kind of work did you do when you came back to the United States?

-The second time I worked picking cotton um, tomatoes, and um...peaches, but it seemed like we arrived too early and that we were at least one week without working. Maybe more, we were waiting for the work to begin. But I worked a lot, almost the whole summer, up until it started to get cold, and then the contracted time was up.

And, you got your citizenship here in the United States?

-Yes, in time. The second time I worked here, I decided to immigrate here, I got my money together and I sent some of it to one of my brothers in Tijuana and he started the application and everything through someone who worked that job. And um...from there I just waited, when my contracted time was up, I left for México and I waited until they gave me, my, my, my immigration papers.

(His wife)-What year was that?

-In 62. The second season I was here was during 1960. I remember that um...there were some people, Mexicans who we went to go visit and talk with us, I remember they were watching on TV when Kennedy was running for President; I believe Nixon was in the Republican party. So, based on that I remember it was 1960 that...

When you once again came back to the United States, how did you arrive, by train again or, and where did you cross the border that time?

-We crossed the border, we got off the train, we crossed the border in Mexicali, and from there they transported people on busses to where they were going to work. And the second time, they took me to Yuba City, during the second contract. Over there too I went to a few different sights depending on what we were going to pick and things like that. Um, the fields were smaller than the ones in Arizona. I came back the first time, with one or two weeks without working. Because the work still hadn't started. But, a little, well uh, boring because without being able to go out, being without money, without being able to spend any, but we had everything where we stayed anyway, a house and food.

Ok, so for you Sir, what does the term bracero mean?

-Well, work, no, for me it wasn't degrading, while in México it sounded a little degrading. And um, the first time I was contracted, I had an aunt who had a brother that had once worked as a bracero...when she found out that I was going to be a bracero, she told me "no", they called me chato, my name is Robert, no. They told me that I wasn't going to be able to do it, your uncle they when he worked as a bracero he couldn't handle it, he came back exhausted. I told them that no matter what I had to go, I didn't have a job in Tijuana and then I started the job and I realized that it wasn't as difficult as my aunt had told me. It was, for me it was easy. They paid well, we got paid by the hour while we were in training and then we earned good money.

So then, the general term, your memories of your time as a bracero are positive ones?

-Yes, yes um, um I never had problems with anyone. We were treated well by everyone, especially in Arizona, the first year, when we would be walking, the Americans would pick us up, then they would take us to where we were going and then they would try to speak to us in Spanish. The immigrants spoke with us, very well, they treated us well and then when we would end the conversation, they would find someone that would be able to take us back to the camp, like we were family. Wonderful.

Has being a bracero changed your life in some way?

-Yes, because it gave me the opportunity to come here to the United States, and get money to receive my papers. After I got my papers, I came to work here in Santa Paula and I worked in the lemon factory here, I don't know if you know where the lemon ranch here is. While working there, I met Delia, who's my wife,

in 1972. Well, we met in 72 while I was getting everything situated to receive my green card and then we got married in 74.

And um, you have three children?

-Yeah

And, where are they all now?

-Two of my children live with us. The eldest is single, divorced, doesn't have kids and then the youngest of my daughters got divorced and um doesn't have enough money to rent or buy a house, so they are staying with us, they are in school, and my daughter works.

(His wife)-She is a teacher.

-For me, I gained a lot from being a bracero.

Our middle child lives in Ventura, he is married too...he got married to an American and they have three children, three daughters. They are well off.

Well, those are all the questions I have for you, I don't know if you have something more that you want to say...

-No, that's everything.

That it was a good experience, with good food...

-I found my wife here, I made my family and everything...I have a question for you both. I understand that this documentation is going to go the Smithsonian um...that uh...I would like to visit that place. Is it a single place in one single town? O...

Uh huh, the Smithsonian, the museum, is in Washington D.C. But she told us, no, that the how do you say it, the exhibition is going to be on the internet, right? She told us.

(Mi classmate Cristina)-I think that...I'm not sure but the coordinator Pilar I believe you mentioned that it was going to be in Ventura when they have all the interviews, because there are a lot of braceros. So when they have all of this, like, because after we send these interviews to University of Texas when they will do more processes, when everything is there, I think they are going to make one exhibition in Washington and here in Ventura, too. But a little is still missing because there are still other students doing other interviews and I think Pilar mentioned that next year they are going to hold another town hall meeting because they want more and more.

-Is it going to be in the same place in Oxnard again?

(Cristina)-I'm not sure if it's going to be at Café on "A" Street again but...

-But they will announce it in the paper?

(Cristina)-Yeah, in the paper or something....

Yeah, but the museum is in Washington...

-Are there other...

(Cristina)- There are 16 other ones besides the one that is in Washington, I think there are 16 more like branches, but I'm not very sure.

-One of my grandchildren was telling me that there was one here in Los Angeles.

(Cristina)- I'm not very sure but I know there are 16 more, I don't know exactly where they are.

-The main one is in Washington?

(His wife)- I wanted to ask...all of the interviews that you are doing, or that you are going to do, going to the Smithsonian, or only a select few?

I'm not too sure about that...I don't know maybe like one part from one and another part from another one no, no I'm not sure maybe like...

(His wife)- I never found...who was the one looking for boots or shoes from someone, mementos they had from their time as braceros? I know they were looking for someone who has shoes...

-Things like that, like boots for working.

(His wife)- You haven't found any yet?

(Cristina)- In the interviews that I have done so far, no.

You don't have any pictures?

No, I didn't keep anything.

(His wife)- Well now, since he immigrated I have some pictures, if you want to see them...

(Cristina)- But from your time as a bracero, no.

-No, no.