

****Bold letter.... Mr. Efrain De Santos**

****Regular letter.... Mr. Samuel Perez**

This is an interview with Mr. Samuel Perez, on September 18, 2008 in the city of Camarillo, California. The interviewer is Efrain de Santos, and this project is part of The Bracero Oral History Project.

We will be asking you questions about your past, your beginning, your family and about your parents. And not only about your immediate family, but also about your childhood; maybe it is going to be hard for you to remember, okay! But you will tell us about your siblings and parents. Is that okay? Its fine!

For all those here present, my name is Efrain De Santos. Mr. Perez, We are very thankful for this interview and for your visit to this campus. We also want thank you for the interest in sharing with us and with our future generations this information. Next, we will start with the questions for this interview.

Mr. Perez where are you from?

I was born in a little town called Indaparapeo, but raised in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. Indaparapeo is a little town in Michoacán, México. **Can you talk to us bout your parents?** First, my father was a Judge before he became a teacher, probably he did not like the idea of sending people to jail; maybe that is why he became a teacher. He was a teacher for around thirty years, after the death of one of my aunts who helped my dad support his eleven children; my aunt was also a teacher also. **Can you tell us about your mom?** My mom never worked, she was an orphan and being an orphan it was hard; she was mistreated by her uncles and cousins. She married my dad when he was thirty three years old and she was eighteen years old: she was very young. When she married my dad, she did not know anything about the country or cooking because she helped her uncle's in their business. Her uncle's were rich, they owned a market, a bakery and some other business, were they use to make chocolate, eggnog, ham and *longaniza**, It was a wealthy family!

Now we are going to talk about education. What was the last grade you attend?

Look, education for us was a little bit hard. Since my dad worked for the federal public school system, he was constantly sent to teach in different towns. He would remain in one town four or five months and then he was moved again; because of his job we were constantly moving from place to place. It was not until we went to live to Morelia that I started second grade. I remained at the same school until I graduated from sixth grade and got my certificate. For my

older siblings it was a different story, they had a better education; my sister and two of my brothers went to private schools; they had this opportunity because my aunt supported their education. Right after I got out of sixth grade my aunt died, therefore, I did not continue on with my education.

Can you tell us about the six years of elementary school? Did you learn to read and write?

Yes. In elementary level, we learned to read and write.

When did you start working?

I started working when I was... I worked and attended school simultaneously. After school, I was working in a movie theater, selling popcorn. Before, in Mexico the school system was different; we would go to school in the morning and after lunch we would return to class.

If you can remember, how old were you when you started working?

Ha... I was... I started working after graduating from elementary school. At that time I was about fifteen, sixteen years old and started working to help my dad support the family; we were tired of moving from place to place.

You told us that your parents had eleven children. At this moment, where are your siblings living?

Well, one of my siblings is... the first one died and the sister that follows me was mother superior of the Franciscan order in Mexico City; she died when she was thirty three years old. Another brother graduated from *La UNAM** (National Autonomous University of Mexico) he majored in Accounting. He worked for the International Bank, but later he established his own business in Mexico City; he owned a *loncheria* (snack bar). He sent all his children to school; one is aeronautical engineer, another is an accountant and the other two received their teaching degree. Another brother younger than me only made it through high school, he began to work after I immigrated to the United States as a *bracero*, and then he started dating a girl and got married. He was living in Morelia, but after he got married, moved to Mexico City. My oldest sister moved to *Huruapan** (City in Michoacán Mexico) after she got married. She gave birth to eleven or twelve children and all of them became photographers. Before immigrating to the States, I worked with my brother in law in his photography shop. I helped him with printing, touch up and with what it takes to print photographs. I have no idea of farm work because I only would go to the country when my father was hired to teach in rural schools. It was then that I would go with some of my fellow classmates to wonder around and to work in the harvesting of corn: we were doing it for pure pleasure and as a game.

Next, we are going to move to the core of this interview. We are going to be talking about the process of hiring; of how you found out about The Bracero Program of nineteen forty two

Okay!

When I found out about The Bracero Program, I was working with my brother in law, then I found another job as miner assistant, demolishing with dynamite and stone hammering the rocks on the side of the road on the stretch between *Jaripo** and *Cotija**: where the famous cheese is made! (*Cotija* Cheese). Later, I moved to *Morelia* and began to work for Pepsi*. After two years working for the company, they sent me to ship our product to a water parks. There a men who was an *Agrarista** and Mayor of that place asked me: Hey, do you want to go to *El Norte**? Then I asked him: Why? And he told me: "Here, with this paper you can be hired as a bracer". Ok, give it to me! He gave me the paper, but because I was working, I did not say anything to anybody. At home, I was talking to my co-worker who was also my roommate and I asked him: Do you think this paper works? Then he told me: Yes, who gave it to you? And I told him the entire story. Then he told me, this paper is to recruit *braceros* and according to this, the recruitment center is going to be in *Irapuato**. Then, I went to my dad and asked him: "Dad would you let me go to see what is going on with this?" He agreed and gave me one hundred pesos*. The day that I was traveling to *Irapuato*, I had to deliver a shipment of Pepsi cola to *Celaya Guanajuato**, I told the truck driver: "Find another person because I'm not going". Then I left for *Irapuato*. There, they checked our hands and then hired us, the hands were the first thing that the American people would check, they would say: "let me see your hands" and if they noticed that you had soft hands, they would not hire you because they knew that you knew nothing about field work. In that sense, I did not have a problem because I was working for Pepsi carrying boxes. Then after they hired us, they transported us in a train from *Irapuato** to *Piedras Negras** and from *Piedras Negras** to Eagle Pass. In Eagle Pass they checked everything and gave us a physical exam; they undressed us to fumigate us with DDT; after that treatment, every part of our body was covered in white and afterwards we took a shower. From Eagle Pass, we crossed in a trailer the whole state of Texas, until we arrived to *Friona*; where we were going to work. I did not know anything about the contract; I just knew that I had forty five days to work. It was around November or December; it was right before Christmas and Thanksgiving because it was freezing. *Friona* is a very cold place and is located in the small square called the Panhandle in the state of Texas. About one hundred and fifty of us were being transported in a trailer that I believe was used to transport cattle; it was just covered with a canvas. Than with the wind the canvas was blown away and it was very cold. In San Angel half of the one hundred and fifty who were traveling with us, got off the trailer because they could not stand the cold. In my case, I was wearing a thick coat; that I don't recall where I got it from, but I was very warm: Therefore, I remained in the trailer until we arrived in *Friona*. In *Friona* they took us to a type of prison, where I believe they kept the WWII prisoners. It was furnished with small bunk beds made with chicken wire and with small cushion as a mattress. I believe that place was sheltering about eight hundred people; it was a big place. The next day, they took us to start picking cotton: I have never seen a cotton plant, but I started picking it! The company gave us five dollars to buy food, but I did not know anything about buying beans or flour. Another friend and I went to the market and spent our five dollars buying apples, bread and other groceries. Three days later we had nothing else to eat. Other friends only bought flour and beans;

1953 & 1954

Kidney Infection

therefore, they had food that lasted them the whole week. But any ways, we had to work and since we had no more money left, we asked for a tortilla or a taco among the rest of the friends. All this happened during the years fifty-three and fifty-four; at that time I was nineteen years old. Physically I was fine; I was able to move my hands very easy. During the cotton cropping, I joined two brothers who were from Chihuahua*; whose profession was to harvest cotton. As a team we were doing very well, but during the first week, I developed a kidney infection: maybe I developed it because I was consuming a lot of beet sugar. I was in pain; therefore, I was not able to collect cotton anymore and because of my illness, they put me to weigh the cotton. In total there were about fifteen men working and I was supposed to enter in a notebook how much cotton every person was collecting. At the end of the day I would get the average of the person who collected the most. For me everything was working perfect, but the collection of cotton only lasted thirty days. One day a friend and I went to the nearest Town Theater and when we came back to our work place the place was empty, they had taken everyone. "What happened?" We ask and they told us: "the work is over and they took everyone back to Mexico". In the contract we still had fifteen days to work, so we begin to look for employment. A white man arrived to the place where we went looking for a job and ask me: Do you know how to drive a tractor? I told him: "oh sure", but I did not know anything about driving tractors. He took me to his ranch and he showed me the tractor he owned; it was a green John Deer. As he was turning the tractor on, I was paying close attention to see how he turned it on. The job was really easy, I just had to disc up a piece of land, but he owned very large pieces of land. I worked in that place for a week; by the way, it was during the Thanksgiving season. On Thanksgiving Day, I was working and he approached me and brings me down from the tractor, than he tells me: "come on, let's not work today" then he invites me over to his house to have dinner. Before I sat at the table, he told me: "wash your hands there", I washed my hands and then took my place at the table with the whole family. It was a big table with plenty of food and I thought: "Oh my God, there is a lot of food" and after that I begin to eat. They made Turkey and other typical thanksgiving dishes; I filled up myself with all this food and wanted me to eat more, but I told them: "no, I'm really full". As I was seated at the table, I was thinking: "No wonder these gringos* are so tall, they eat a lot", I thought that it was a daily thing; I did not realize that it was a holiday. When the work was done with this rancher, he took me over to the company were they remove the cotton from the flower. At that time I was famous for being a good tractor driver. A rancher named Claris Martin who later became my boss, arrived looking for a tractor driver. He was told that I was a tractor driver and he approached me and proposed that I go to work for him, for which I agreed. Another young man who was always hanging out with me came to work for this rancher also. One cold morning, we were cropping and loading cotton with a pitchfork onto a trailer and the young man, who was also from Morelia*, decide to leave the work place because he could not stand the cold; he felt his ears cracking. He told me: "I'm leaving" and he left. I stayed to work for this rancher and began to learn everything about agriculture, especially how to manage and drive all the different brands of tractors he owned; he owned Internationals, Minneapolis and other brands of tractors. Later, I learned about irrigating the land, I learned it so well that I was able to control the seven water pumps that irrigated the land all by myself, that was one of the main reason why he kept me working with him. The next land owner owned eight water pumps and he had four employees with two trucks to do the irrigation labor, and it was only one more pump. The secrets of the irrigation system is, to dig ditches and when the pump is running, the water is directed using a tarp and then we draw the water using pipes that are in form of an "S". The secret is pay close attention and calculate and control that every furrow gets the same

amount of water because if the water only runs through one furrow then the rest of the furrows will not get any. I would check from one end to the other to make sure that the water was running equally in every furrow and in case that one furrow was carrying more water than the other, than two pipes must join to make the water flow all the way to the end. So I worked irrigating and with the tractors; preparing the land, disking it up and making furrows for the next season. The rancher also had the business of buying and selling South Dakota fattening calves. To make the cattle grow, we would feed them proper cattle food and also a mixture of fermented corn cane and grass. To make the fermented food, we had to incubate in deep ground holes the remaining of corn cane mixed with the grass. I also worked putting up wire fences, to make corrals for the cattle. The hardest part of this job is to install the corners; first, the corner posts pointing in different directions must to be installed: "there are some secret tactics to make the corner posts sturdy". To put up the wire fence, some equipment is required: gloves and stretchers to pull the barbed wire.

Mr. Perez, when you were living in Mexico did you think about the hard work and the struggles you went through? What motivated you to immigrate to the United States?

What motivated me to migrate to the United States was poverty, but mainly the curiosity to know the so called Norte*, from which I use to hear a lot of things. My brother and one of his friends tried to immigrate with a legal passport, but when immigration officials found that they were coming to work, they did not let them. But mainly, I crossed over for pure curiosity because I had my job which was less heavy than working in the fields; I was working in the photo shop developing and retouching pictures. We use to retouch wedding, *quinceañeras** and other occasional pictures. This type of job is really delicate: "I don't know if you know about the process of retouching, but we use specials pencils to retouch the negative print". By setting the negative print on top of a motion lamp, we were able to clear out with the pencils the imperfections in people's faces: we make girls look beautiful! (All present laughs). Curiosity and need were the main reasons for which I immigrated. When I was in working in Friona, my aunt died and my dad who was a teacher became the sole support for the family. Later my dad got ill and I became the only support for the whole family. With my support, I was able to contribute for the education of two of my siblings; my brother attended a four year college and my sister studied accounting in a private school and she worked at...(the next part cannot be understood) that means that I finish raising the family. Up to this day the main reason why people immigrate to the United States is because there are no sufficient employments. Only the individuals, who own land, have the opportunity to plant and crop, but we did not own any land but the house that we lived in. With my father's salary as a teacher and then getting sick I had no other choice than to find a job.

Then, scarcity in your family was an influence for you to immigrate to the United States.

Yes! First of all, I was nineteen years old and as I mentioned before, right before graduating from school I began working with my brother-in-law at the photo shop and later at the Pepsi Company. At the Pepsi Company, I was getting paid very well and I had all the benefits. "I don't know if it was destiny but I was very happy there, until a man handed me a flyer to be hired as a *bracero* where I was delivering Pepsi products." This man was handing the flyer to all the *agrarias** and farm workers, to promote the immigration to the United State and that way

they could make some money to invest in their land, in cattle and to better their family life. But I immigrated for pure curiosity because I had a good position in Pepsi cola.

Samuel, how was the hiring process? What was the process you followed? What paperwork did you fill to comply with the requirements to join the *Bracero* program? Was there a special term that was given to the *braceros*?

No, the only term was *bracero*. There was a term I heard once: *Remiso** and I guess it was used during the years of the *Bracero Program*; all hired *braceros* cannot vote in any Mexican elections. I was 19 years old when I voted last time and it was not until I became a United States Citizen that I was able to vote again. I never voted for any president or politician of Mexico, until I voted during the election of President Vicente Fox. As a U.S. Citizen, I was taking advantage of my right to vote, therefore, I voted for President Clinton. My whole family is democrat, and thanks to my dual citizenship I am able to vote here and in Mexico.

Then, what were the requirements? More or less, what that did you have to bring with you? Did you have to fill out some paperwork or it was just by word?

No, In Irapuato all that was required to be enrolled in the Bracero Program, was to have the *Cartilla del Servicio Militar Liberada**. For me that was not a problem, I got my *Cartilla*... * when I was attending a military school called *El Pentathlon**. We would go every Sunday to march, exercise and learn how to use the Mousers. When we attended those Sunday classes, they would call roll and at the end of the program if the student had perfect attendance they would grant them there *Cartilla*... *. Over that, I had no problem because I had perfect attendance, so I just went to present my signing book to the *Veintiuna Zona Militar** and they issued me the *Cartilla*... *. In the barrack, there was another Sunday program for those who wanted to get their *Cartilla*... *, but were not enrolled in *El Pentathlon**.

Did they talk to you about your salary? Or about how much the wage was going to be? Or how were they going to pay you? No! They did not mention anything to you?

No, they did not mention anything about our salary. I do not know if they do that because they think that immigrants come to the United States in of search of a better life. Immigrants do not care about anything, not even about how much money are they going to make, they just come.

What did the people who hired you tell you? Or what did the Mexican government tell you? No one told you anything?

They just told me: "You are going to be working in Texas", but I did not know what I was going to be doing there. After they fumigated us, they brought us to Friona and it was there, that they told us that our job was to crop cotton. "It was there, that I was able to see what a cotton plant looks like". I do not remember, how much they paid for every pound of cotton, but because my duty was to weigh the cotton cropped by the croppers, they calculated my salary by taking the average of production made by the croppers. Later, I was hired by another landlord and he paid me thirty five dollars per week. At that place I was working about ten or more hours a day

pick

19 pounds

because when the season to crop wheat or milo maize arrived, I had to thresh the cultivation area. The threshing machine can be raised or lowered depending on the height of the wheat; if the spike is too low than the threshing machine needs to be lowered in order for it to cut. During that season I begin my day at seven in the morning and I would call it a day at ten at night. When working late, I had to turn on my headlight to be able to do the job and also be on the alert of the powerful tornados that absorb everything on their way. To renew my *bracero** contract, my boss had to go to San Angelo to renew the contract every six months. He was tired of having to go every six months, therefore, he told me: "go back to Mexico and gather all your papers and bring them to my friend who is a lawyer in El Paso" because he is going to help you to get your green card. I went back to Morelia, gathered all my papers and traveled back to Ciudad Juarez*. As part of the requirements, I had to get a letter stating that I was a resident of Ciudad Juarez*. When I had all the required papers together, I traveled to see the lawyer, he arranged all the paperwork, gave it back to me, I took it to immigration and a month later they gave me my green card. The immigration officer asked me when he handed me my card: "How did you get your green card so fast?" and I answer: well the person for whom I work for wants to hire me permanently. After I received my residency, I went back to see my boss friend and he told me: "Well now you have your green card and you can go anywhere you want, but I recommend you go back to work for your boss. I returned to work for this man and I stayed with him from nineteen fifty three or nineteen fifty four up to nineteen fifty seven or fifty eight. At the end of nineteen fifty eight, I was already tired of working in the field and of the routine. I also was tired of not having nothing and living in a small trailer with no utilities; I had to bathe myself in a really small tub or outside in a ground tank. Summer time was hard for me because there were a lot of bees in the area. To prevent them from stinging me, every time that I saw them coming, I had to dunk myself into the tank with cold water. At that time I was the manager, my boss hired a few *braceros** to pull out the weeds from the cultivated area. Since I was in charge of them, I had to bring them to the places that they needed to work. Among them, there was a man named Esteban; he was from Las Conchas a city close to Jalisco*, Michoacán* and Colima*. At that time I had decided to move to San Joaquin Valley, but I did not want to just leave, therefore I told Esteban: "learn everything that I am responsible for because you will keep my position" and he did learn everything. After I left, we stayed in contact with each other via mail, but I do not know how long he remained in the job. When the time for me to leave arrived, I lied to my boss by telling him that I had to leave to Morelia* because a family member was sick. He believed me and he personally took me to the Bus Depot. At the Bus Depot, he started crying and then told me: Samuel, I do not think you are coming back; that broke my heart, but I still left. My boss had his wife Martha and three children; Larry, Martha and Michael. After forty years he wrote me a letter and I believe he told me that he had three or four children more. I had a good relationship with the whole family; they would take me to the movies with them. The little trailer where I was living was also very cold; it did not have any heating system. I just had a small heater to heat up the place because during winter it gets very cold. I do not know if they named the place Friona because of the cold, but that place is very cold that even things can get frozen. One occasion when winter arrived I had a box with eggs: "I did not own a refrigerator", I also had some apples and other food and during the night the small heater went off and I woke up because it was frizzing. I put my clothes on and went out and I saw my boss standing next to the butane tank, he was trying to cover it with bags soaked in gasoline to defrost the gas and be able to have gas in the trailer and in his house. In the morning I wanted to have some eggs for breakfast, I turned on the stove, heated up the pan with oil and grabbed some eggs. When I went

to break the egg shell, I notice that the eggs were frozen: "can you imagine how I was living in that place". I throw eggs against the wall but they had as a piece ice; even the apples were frozen too. I tolerated the job I was doing for pure necessity because I was the only support for my parents; I sent all my pay checks to them. Let me tell you another story: when I already had my green card, I was the one who drove all the *braceros* from the area to Sunday mass; there was a little church that was built by a Canadian priest. In that church the mass was celebrated still in Latin, I knew all the parts of the mass because when I was young I was an acolyte in my church. Therefore, I would assist the priest during the mass and even help pass the plate for the Sunday collection. The priest was aware that I was the one who drove to mass in my little truck all the *braceros* from all around the farms. One time a man arrived to my work place and my boss went to tell me: "Hey Sammy, do you not want to work for me anymore?" That's not true, why? He replied "well there is a man outside who is looking for you. "Who is it? I asked". "It is an American man, who is driving a new car". I went out and it was the priest, I don't know how he found the address for the place I work for. I approached him and he told me: "you know what, I spoke to my superiors and we came to a conclusion that we would like to send you to the seminary (everyone present laughs). For me, it was a good opportunity to leave my work and get an education, because I never had the opportunity to get an education, but I told father: "father, I do not think I have a vocation and on top of that, I am the only one who sustains for my family; I send all my salary to them. After that talk, he left and that was it. After the priest had left, my boss asked me: who was that man?" I answered: "it is the priest from where we go to church every Sunday". When he heard that, he calmed down; he thought that I was leaving him. I did not speak a lot of English, the first word I learned was: "People". The word "people" was often used in the radio stations: "people this" and "people that", but I did not know the meaning of "people", until I asked my boss. (The next few seconds are hard to be understood). Another word I heard my boss use was "honey". I learned it because I would always hear him tell his wife: "honey this" or "honey that". So I started calling him honey. So one day he told me: "No, do not call me that, only she calls me honey" (everyone present laughs). After forty years we continue to send letters to each other, he sent me a picture of his sixtieth anniversary signed also by Martha and in parenthesis he puts "honey" (everyone present laughs). When I wrote him back, I also sent him an invitation to our fortieth anniversary celebration. I did not learn a lot of English when I was living in Friona, but I learned it when I attended adult school at night and I am still learning a few more words.

Mr. Perez, going back just a little, how was the reception center where they received you and fumigated you? Physically, how was it? Please describe it to us.

It was an office on the border between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras; the territorial difference can be noticed right away. I just cannot forget that moment when we arrived there, they gave us potato sandwiches and coffee with Carnation (Evaporated) milk. I do not know why, but I just cannot forget the taste of that delicious coffee with milk. I have never drank coffee with evaporated milk and the sandwich was good too because where I am from we do not have them. They treated us very nice, with the only exception that we had to get undressed so they can fumigate us with DDT powder and examine us from front and back to see if we were not ill.

What type vaccines did you get?

No, we did not get any type of vaccine. They just took some X-rays, but no vaccines.

Did they present any option of employment to you?

No, we had no option; I guess the only work available in Friona, was the cultivation of cotton. No one asked anything, we were here to work and that was it.

What types of belongings were you allowed to bring?

No, we had no belongings, the only thing we had was just our clothes.

But you did not see if they took away something belongings from other people?

No, because we were coming from Mexico, without nothing. The problem was when we were going back to Mexico. Mexican authorities were really bad; they would take away our belongings, because they did not want us to import anything.

After they gave you your permit, how many years did you keep your bracero permit?

Well, because I was renewing my contract every six months, I was granted a special bracero permit not granted to regular braceros. Right after my Permanent Residency was granted, I registered myself for the Selective Services and few days later the recruiters responded by mail. Physically, I was perfectly fine (next few seconds are hard to be understood). I do not remember what year it was and if it was during the Korean war, but they wanted to recruit me. When my boss was told about it, he rejected the proposal by saying that he needed me in the ranch to help him with the harvest, so I ended up not going. I had my Selective Service card, but I do not know what I did with it.

During the time in which you were a bracero, how many places did you work for? Or was it only one ranch that you worked for?

I worked in three different places: The first upon my arrival, harvesting cotton, the second was at the ranch where I was hired for a week to disk up the lands and my last employment was at the ranch where I remained until I ran away (everyone present laughs).

How did they transport you from the hiring center? How was the way of transportation? How did they transport you to your work place?

Like I mentioned before, from Eagle Pass to Friona, they transported us in a trailer used to transport cattle and from which the tarpaulin flew away. On our arrival to our destination, every landlord would go in their own vehicles to pick up the laborers they hired. My last employment where I spent most of my time, I was brought by the rancher that hired me only to drive his tractors.

Then the trailer in which you were transported have a cattle smell?

Not really, I do not remember that it had a cattle or manure smell; I think it was because the trailer was long and just covered with a tarpaulin; through which cold air could still come in.

More a less how many braceros were traveling with you?

Like I told you before, we were about one hundred and fifty or more. I do not know how many trailers were going to the same place, but on the one that I was traveling on was full, until half of the travelers got off the trailer because they were almost dying from the cold.

Did you make any long lasting friendship while you were working as a bracero?

Yes, I became good friends with an older man who would come to help occasionally, his name was Ben Martinez. He was approximately forty years old and had a prosthesis leg. Before he would begin irrigating the ground, he would secure his leg. One day when he was helping me, he got stuck in the soil because the cultivation was almost half of one meter and with the water it becomes very muddy. I was far from where he was, and then I notice that he has it was doing signs with his hands; I drove in my truck to the area and then I noticed that he was stuck. From the bed of the truck I pulled him out and I heard a suction noise (with his mouth, he does the noise of sucking); it was his prosthesis that had been sucked in by the mud. Then I had to go and pull his prosthesis out of the mud. I also became good friends with my boss and with a white men who owned a Harley Davidson; he was the next door neighbor. He was amazed that I could do all the irrigation work all by myself. He would ask me: "how you do it? And I would answer: "It takes practice".

Among the braceros who were working with you, there were also people who had no working permit?

No, all the people working there, were barceros.

Then, illegal people were not permitted to work?

No, not there, everyone must show legal documents.

In some instance, did the Mexican Authorities show up at your work place, to check the quality of work that you were performing?

No, Never... **Never!** They never showed up...

I do not know, but lately I have heard that some braceros are claiming that there is some money that is owed to them. I do not know, but according to them, it is money that was saved for them out of every pay check. I have a brother-in-law that was also a bracero and he argues that this movement is happening in Mexicali* and that he paid ten or fifteen dollars, to check on the status of that claim, but he has not heard anything from them. Another person says that the money was stolen by the Mexican Government. I do not know what happen to that money, but to be honest I

am not interested in claiming anything. If for any reason I should get anything, it is going to be a lot because I spent many years working as a bracero.

Now, did the United States immigration check in on you?

Never... **was there any type of control?** I never saw any immigration officer. No one was interested in chasing immigrants; first, because immigrants were in the field; second, because the place was too far north and third, because all they wanted was the immigrants to work the land. I did not see an immigration officer until I came to San Fernando in nineteen sixty; by then I was working for General Motors. At General Motors, there was a greedy man who I believe called immigration services on me. Because one morning as I was coming out of my room and walking towards the Goodwill parking lot where I had my car parked, two men approached me and requested my documents: "Can we see your papers". I got scared but I told them: "well, let me see yours first". Then, they showed me their badge; it was then that I realized that they were immigration officers. Right away I pull out my wallet and show them my residence card. When they saw my card they put their head down and walked away. It was the first and only time that I have been requested by immigration to show them my documents and it was many years ago and now who cares about me, I'm already old.

Mr. Perez, how did you communicate with your family in Mexico?

By mail! My boss thought that it would be easier for me to send money by check. Therefore, I opened a bank account in Friona, Texas and they gave me a checkbook. With my checkbook at hand, I was able to send money every two weeks. It's funny because now in Mexico personal checks are allowed, but back then my family did not have a problem cashing them. I was the hope of my family because of the monetary support I provided. Economically, Mexico was bad, currently things are getting better. **Right!**

How often did you see your family? How long did it take you to see your family again?

The first time I went back, was to gather all my documents and I think I went again for just a week. The second time I went, I took with me a twenty-two caliber rifle and the authorities wanted to keep it, but I stripped it down and put it in my suitcase. That means, I just went to Mexico, two times. **During the time you were a bracero?** Yes... yes

Now, we are going to talk about your daily routine while you were a bracero. Also we are going to talk about the life conditions in which you lived.

Around how many days did you work per week?

Seven days a week. **Seven days!** Yes. The only time I would take, was when I would go to mass. But before I leave for mass, I would turn on the irrigation system. And on my return from church, I would put my boots on, to begin my journey.

Please describe a normal day for you, since morning and until night.

When it was time irrigate the land, I would begin my day by turning on the irrigation system and throughout the day I would be switching it from place to place. During lunch, I would go and cook some eggs or something else and then I would return to work.

So did you eat lunch at the field?

No, I would drive to my trailer, to cook something. Even though the lots were very large, I could still come back to my trailer to cook and have lunch.

Usually, what would you make?

Regularly, I would make eggs, bacon or sandwiches. Sometimes, I would not have time to make tortillas; I not even could think about making tortilla... no, I did not have time for that.

Did you have to pay for your own food?

Yes, I had to buy everything. **So you have to buy everything!**

How much did you have to pay for rent? Was there any charge to live there?

No. I did not have to pay any rent; they did not charge me.

Who owns the trailer?

It belonged to my boss

To your boss!

Yes.

Then he provided a place for you to live and you just had to buy your own food?

Yes, I had to buy my own food and other personal objects. A friend of mine, who was also brother of a priest and of Ofelia; a girl I liked a lot, got into a huge problem; he did something to a girl and her siblings wanted to kill him. One day Ofelia wrote me and asked me if I could help her brother because he wanted to run away from Mexico. I talked to my boss about it and he personally went to pick him up; back then it was easier to cross over an immigrant. His profession in Mexico was a mechanic; therefore he did not like the idea of working in the fields. On morning my boss had to throw water at him, for him to wake up. One night we had nothing to eat, so my friend and I went to the cage where the chickens were and we caught five of them. To pluck the chickens feathers, we used the water pressure of the pump; it was really easy, with the pressure the chicken was clean of feathers and ready to cook. Before we left the area, we made sure not to leave any signs of feathers on the ground. One day my boss approached me and asked: "Samuel, have you seen a coyote because it seems that my chickens are disappearing

and I told him: "No, I have not seen anything". But he never knew about all about all this. Last night, I was thinking about telling him the truth about the chicken story, the next time I wrote him. A short time later my friend the priest brother, left work because he was not able to support the hard work. During the winter, it was really hard because of the cold, but it was also a joy and novelty because I could experience the white snow falling. Due to the heavy snow, sometimes it was even hard to open the doors.

Then, the trailer was furnished? Please tell me about it.

No, it just had a small bed and a...and a stove! Yes... and a little tub to bathe myself, but before I took a shower I had to warm up the water. (The daughter interrupts and asks him about the size of the Trailer)

Now tell us more a less... Did the trailer include a toilet with sewer line? Was the trailer just for you?

The trailer was just for me, and no, it did not have a toilet (everyone present laughs). To do my necessities I had to go outdoors, there was no commodities. The daughter interrupted and asked him: "how big was it?" Maybe about two meter and a half by two meter wide; It was the kind of trailers that only has two small windows on the sides and one in front

How were you paid; weekly biweekly or monthly?

When I arrived with my green card at hand, I asked my boss for a raise. I told him that I wanted to gain fifty, instead of thirty-five dollars, and he told me: hahaha... (He laughs). But he ended up giving me the raise to fifty dollars a week.

Did you save any money? Or, would you send it all to Mexico?

I would deposit it into my bank account and from there; I would send some money to my parents.

Now, did all the braceros that were working with you, get paid the same as you?

No, I do not know what happened to all of them. Because like I mentioned to you before, when my friend and I came back from the theater they were all gone.

Tell us: during the time you were a bracero, before you even began to work for your last boss, did you all gain the same? Or, it depends on how much everyone make?

Everyone gained depending on how much cotton they cropped. As I mentioned to you before, when I was the manager of the land, the landlord hired more braceros and I would take them to do the work that was needed to be done. The five of them were from Colima and I provided them with water and transportation from place to place, but I do not know how much they were paid.

Did they ever delay your paycheck? No, never. Or, **were they always on time?** Yes, always, I never had a problem with that issue

How did they calculate your hours? How did they calculate the hours and the work?

In my case, I would work as many hours as I needed to accomplish the work I was responsible for. When I was working driving a tractor, my boss left to South Dakota to buy more fattening calves, but before he left, he gave me instructions to do some work. He owned a very strong Minneapolis tractor that was used to cultivate the land. He wanted me to disc up all the large pieces of land he owned. It was really easy because I would just drive three times in it and then I would set it to automatic, and it would be driven by itself. I would leave at ten p.m. I would return and add fuel; I would jump onto the tractor, stop it, fuel it, turn it on again and let it run again by itself. During the day, I would use another tractor to work the land in another place. When my boss returned from South Dakota, he arrived with his two brothers, his father and his grandfather who owned a Cadillac, and almost cried because he could not believe that I had disked up all the land all by myself.

Now we are going to talk about the problems you went through when you were a bracero. Did you ever have a problem at your workplace?

Just with a bracero who I think was from Zacatecas. He was a very big man; he did not like me because he did not want me to give him instructions of what to do. One day he got mad and hit me with a two by four. That pissed me off and I went straight to talk to the boss and I told him: you know what, make a choice, me or him. He kept me and went to take the other one to the braceros center. This incident was the only problem I had.

In case of an illness or of an incident like the one you went through when the man hit you, what would they do?

I never really got sick when I was working in Friona and at General Motors I had perfect attendance because I never missed work even though I felt sick. With eleven children there is no time of getting sick.

But what would they do in case someone would get sick? Did you ever hear of someone getting sick? How would they treat them?

You know what, I never lived with anybody and I was always by myself in my trailer. With the only exemption when my friend came to work for a few days, but other than that I was always by myself.

What about complaints? Did you hear anybody complaining for the way they were treated?

No, the only problem at that time was racism. When I bought my truck, I would drive myself to the nearest town and as I started walking down the streets, some young people about my age, would call me "wetback", but since I did not know what they were talking about, I did not care. I think that when you are working for someone who treats you fine a long lasting friendship can be created. Like I mentioned before, after forty years, my boss and I are still in contact by mail. I'm sure that he got really mad when I left because he wrote me, but I never told him that I moved to

California. Before I moved to California I was living in Morelia. The reason I came to California was because one of my aunts who was already old, had the need to travel to San Fernando and asked me if I could accompany her. When we arrived in San Fernando, her son-in-law who was working for General Motors asked me if I wanted to work for the company and I said yes. The next day he took me in to apply for the job and I was hired; I ended up staying in that job until I retired.

Going back to the theme of racism and discrimination: did you ever experience it or heard of someone who experience it? And, How was experimented?

I think up to this day discrimination is acquired; and is acquired by gang members and all the people who opt for not working and instead receive Welfare. Personally, I have not experienced any type of racism; if I go into a store, everyone would treat me fine. I have two good friends who are white; I have known one of them for more than fifty years, since I was single. Both have treated me fine and both come to visit me.

Not even during the time of the Bracero Program?

No, I already told you that I have not experienced it. **You have not!** Just with the exception when they called me "wetback". Like I told you before, about the neighbor who owned the motorcycle and lived next to us on the ranch. He always treated me very nice and even gave me lessons on how to drive a motorcycle. All my neighbors refer about me with good compliments. I think that all these good compliments influenced my boss to fix my immigration status, from bracero to resident. Maybe another way of discrimination would be, when then fumigated us with DDT, but that was nothing for me. I just took it as a compliance to prevent any spread of lice's or any other contagious disease.

While you were a bracero, what would you do on your free time? You told us already that you had no free time, but what would you do as a hobby?

I had a subscription with Readers Digest in Spanish and spent a lot of time reading their magazines.

But you were free to go anywhere you want?

Yes, if I had time for it. During the irrigation of the land, I had to change the water from place to place and to make sure that the water was running fine and if everything was fine, I could do whatever I wanted. It was up to me if I wanted make time for myself.

Did you like to hear music?

Yes, but there was only country music. **So there was no Spanish music?** Yes, there radio station was from Sonora, who played *Musica Norteña* and I do not really like *Musica Norteña*.

Where you lived, how far was the nearest town or city?

From where I lived the nearest town was Friona, it was about maybe fifteen to twenty Kilometers; it was not far.

What was the name of the church you attended? That was one of your hobbies?

I do not remember the name of the church, but I know that the priest who built it was a carpenter and he was building it because there was no church in that place.

We as Mexicans have the tradition to celebrate Holy week and Christmas, how did you celebrate all this?

No, I left all those celebrations behind because of the amount of work we had to do, if we were lucky enough we would just go to mass on Sundays. I believe that the only two holydays we observed were Thanksgiving and Fourth of July, but the rest of the days was just work.

Then, you quit celebrating the Mexican Independence and El Cinco de Mayo.

During that time, I totally forgot about all Mexican holidays. That was one of the things I missed the most of my country. I always asked myself: "how come I cannot vote for a Mexican president if I'm a citizen?" I investigated the reason of why I could not vote in Mexico and they told me: "because you are a *remiso*, therefore, you cannot vote", but still I did not know what the term *remiso* was. The first time I voted in Mexico, I traveled to Tijuana and voted for Vicente Fox and now for Felipe Calderon. I heard on the news that many people were killed by two grenades in Morelia, did you hear about it? Yes! How sad, right?

Now Mr. Perez, we are going to talk about your life after being a bracero. When did you go back to Mexico? Your bracero contract expired right? Yes! And you immigrated again as Resident of the United Sates right? Yes!

No, I did not stay In Mexico. Like I mentioned before, when my boss cried at the Bus Depot I was going back to Mexico, but I had my residency already. I came back to the United States, when I came to accompany my aunt and then, I ended up staying here to work for General motors. I would just go back to visit my girlfriend. I did not marry Ofelia, but I married another young lady who my dad liked a lot and lived close to my house, in Mexico? Yes, in Morelia. Up to this date, my wife has been a good woman to me.

So you went back as a resident and then got married? For how long did you stay in Mexico?

No, I did not stay in Mexico for a long time. I lived in Ciudad Juarez and I worked there for few days. I had to work because I did not have any more money left, not even to buy food; I spent most of it on the process to get my green card. In Ciudad Juarez I began working for a man who worked repairing coolers. I helped him at his shop and he would pay me enough to buy some taquitos and a Pepsi. Later, I found a well paying job in construction; hanging drywall. We would travel to Las Cruces and since I had my green card I was able to cross the border with no problem. Afterward, a person wanted to hire me to go and work for an artist in Beverly Hills and accompany some ladies to work as domestic servants in Hollywood. I took all the ladies but I left them in Beverly Hills and I went to the San Joaquin Valley. There, I worked for six months on a ranch in Corcoran cultivating sesame seeds and cotton. While I was working there, I got sick, they had to perform a surgery to remove a mass in my chest that they thought it could be cancer. After the surgery I stayed six months and then I returned to Morelia. It was not until I came back with my aunt and began to work for General Motors that they took some chest x-rays

and the doctors diagnosed that I had Valley Fever. Then, you came back to get married? No, I was dating her by mail and a short time later I went back to marry her by Court and then when she got her a passport, I went back again to marry her by the church. Because we stayed here, all our children were born here.

Great how long after did you have your first child...?

All of them graduated from The University: Six from USC and now she will be number seven to get her doctorate in education. And the rest of my children: one graduated from Cal. Lutheran, three from CSUN and the rest of them from USC. All this was possible thanks to God's help. I sent a picture of my whole family to my ex-boss in Texas.

After how many years, did you become a U. S Citizen?

After fifteen years we applied to become a U.S. Citizen, at first I did not want to because I had in my mind what my dad had told me: "My son, never become a U.S Citizen". Someone presented to me the opportunity to change my status, I came to the conclusion that I had to become a U.S Citizen for my own good and I was sure that nothing was going to change; I was going to keep the same color of skin. After I became a U.S Citizen, I traveled as a chaperon to Mexico, with a group of student from USC. It was cultural interchange and the purpose of this program was to bring the students to visit different states of Mexico. First, we visited Mexico City, Than Morelia, Periban and the volcano in Michoacán; in Periban we spent Christmas and New years there.

Mr Perez. We are almost at the end of this interview, but we would like to close it with a reflection, is that ok.

Yes.

What signifys the term bracero to you?

The Word bracero comes from the Spanish word *brazo* (arm), and it means that we come to help this country with our arms and our work. Up to this day, legal or illegal immigrants are still contributing to the agricultural industry of this country; we do the work that many do not want to do. The braceros came to this country to replace the hands of those who were fighting in WWII. I truly believe that Mexico has been a good neighbor country and it has cooperated for the betterment of this country. Sometimes people have a bad connotation of the term bracero, therefore they reject the person who was a bracero. Personally, I believe that a bracero is a person who comes to work with dignity for this country. For that reason, I truly believe that people must show respect for a bracero. **Yes!**

How do you feel when someone calls you bracero?

It does not bother me at all. Let me tell you a story: I own a nineteen sixty-four or sixty-five truck; now it is rusty, but it still works. I use this truck to do lawn work to make more money for my children's education. This was a side job because I was still working for General Motors. One day I was driving around and a friend of mine, who is a white man, stopped me to tell me: "hey you, where did you get your truck from, from the bottom of the river? Because. it is all

rusty". That man was the only one who used to call me "bracero". I was not offended by that, on the contrary I felt proud for being a bracero.

Then, in general, you had more positive experiences, than negatives? Oh yes!

I believe that everything is marked down in our destiny; every person has a chance of making it happened. For me, it was my destiny that took me to Friona and there I was able to learn and become a hard working person; I was responsible and I always tried to do the best work I could. By doing the things I was supposed to be doing, my boss rewarded me with my residency, and as a result, I did not have to remain illegal. On the contrary, from being a bracero, I became resident and from resident to U.S. Citizen. I believe that every person gains its own destiny with its behavior. Like I mentioned before, I have not had a problem with discrimination because I know how to give and show respect to all people.

Did having been a bracero change your life?

Absolutely, with that, I was able to obtain my green card and to leave a mark in Friona, for being a good worker. I gained my boss's recognition; therefore he rewarded me with my green card. My green card made it easier for me to stay here and obtain a better job and to raise my children and to give them an education. As a parent I did my best, I was responsible and I never left them alone, like many parent do. To do all this, God gave me the strength to do it; he gave me the opportunity to educate them. I'm very proud of what I have achieved with my children and in life, and now I will help my children children's in whatever I can. In fact, today I went to church because two of my granddaughters invited us to a grandparent recognition event. They sang for us, they thanked us and at the end they called us to the front of the altar and personally thanked us. At home we babysit six of our grandkids and that's how we support our children. We help society by encouraging Latinos to stay in school and to reach a goal in education. It just irritates me to see many people working in a low class employment; for en example, on our way here, we passed through Fillmore and all we saw was people working in the fields. I'm so glad to see that many of the kids, whose parents work in the fields, are now taking advantage of education. For me a bracero is someone who deserves respect because they were a huge help for the United States, during the years that many of the American men were fighting in WWII

Mr. Perez, we would like to thank you for your time and your family's

No, thank you very much for listening to me; I believe that with all the events of my life, my life can be made into a movie. Once, when I still did not speak any English, I was moving some calves from a wet corral full of manure and I told my boss: "hey boss, you're full of shit" (all present laughs). I did not mean to offend him; I was just trying to make him aware that he was getting full of cattle's droppings. I did not know cattle's pooh was called manure and not shit (all present laughs). I have lots of stories to share, but maybe if there was more time available I could share them.

Thank you very much for your cooperation. To serve you! Now that this university is running this great project, we would like to take advantage and record much of the history that was left in the past. We need more people like you who want to share their stories with new generations to motivate them to keep believing in the power of education and to value the hard work you all did to bear fruits we are enjoying today.

I'm an ex-bracero, but most of my kids are excellent teachers and they are helping many Latinos get educated because there are teachers from different ethnic groups who do not believe in Latino education. These teachers do not have the sufficient patient to teach, they say That Latinos are dumb. I'm really proud of my kids because I know they are doing a great Job. I do not regret all the hard work I did as a bracero; working ten hour days, dealing with the dust that irritates the skin and also supporting the deafening noise that the thresher would make. At that time I never felt tired, I never thought of anything, I just worked and continue on with my life. I truly believe that every person who does their best in life will be successful. People ask me for the secret I used to educate my kids or they ask me how I did it, but I respond to them: "I just do what I supposed to do and that is it". As a dad, I worked, but I was also committed to the progress of my kids in school; I would visit their classroom and their teachers and by doing it does not require a secret. I think that people are not successful because they do not do what they are suppose to do, they rather waste their life drinking or with women. People think that I was successful because I did something right and I just think, that I made the right choices for my children. At this moment I'm recuperating from three bypass surgeries that was performed on me in July, I almost died, but I'm still here.

Thank you very much...

To serve you.

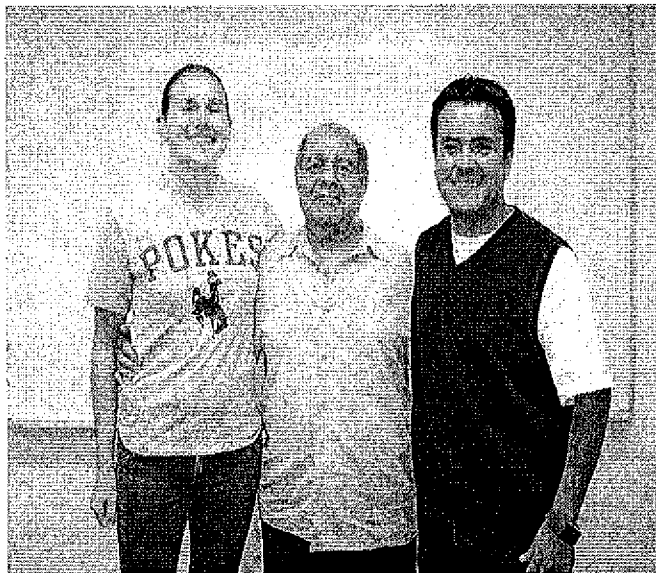
Index

- ***Agrarista:** A person who sows in lands that does not belongs to him.
- ***Bracero:** from the Spanish word *brazo*, meaning arm and given to Mexican agricultural laborers during WWII.
- ***Cartilla del Servicio Militar Liberada:** Men at the age of 18 (in Mexico) are obligated by law to complete one year of military service "servicio militar" and when completed, they get their "Cartilla del Servicio Militar Liberada" which is used for identification, and they (men) need to present it when they want to travel to foreign countries.
- ***Celaya:** City in Guanajuato Mexico.
- * **Ciudad Juarez:** City in Chihuahua Mexico
- ***Cotija:** City in Michoacán Mexico.
- ***Chihuahua:** City in northern Mexico
- ***DDT:** Pesticide used with great effect during WWII among both military and civilian populations to control mosquitoes spreading malaria and lice transmitting typhus.
- ***El Norte:** The United States.
- ***El Pentathlon:** Independent military School
- ***Gringo:** A person from a non-Spanish speaking country.
- ***Huruapan:** City in Michoacán Mexico
- ***Irapuato:** City in Guanajuato Mexico.
- ***Jaripo:** City in Michoacán Mexico.
- ***Jalisco, Michoacán and Colima:** *Sates in Mexico*
- ***La UNAM:** National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City
- ***Loncheria:** sank bar
- ***Longaniza:** Mexican Sausage.
- ***Morelia:** City in Michoacán Mexico
- ***Pepsi:** The Soda Company.
- ***Pesos:** Curerency in Mexico and in many Latin American Countries.
- ***Piedras Negras:** City in Coahuila Mexico.
- ***Quinceañeras:** Sweet fifteen celebrations.
- ***Remiso:** Reluctant.
- ***San Angel:** (San Angelo) City in Texas.
- ***Veintiuna Zona Militar:** Military barrack.

FOTOS DEL RECUERDO MEMORY PICTURES



Mr. Pérez and Me



Mr. Pérez, Kim and Me



Mr. Perez, His two Daughters, His Son-in-law and Pilar