

E: *This letter represents what the student is saying (interviewer)*

J: *This letter represents what Julian is saying (interviewee)*

*This interview of Mr. Julian Hernandez was conducted by student Erica Jimenez on November 29, 2010.

Traducción

E: My name is Erica Jimenez and I am here with Mr. Julian Hernandez for the interview today, November 29, 2010. Let us begin, well talk to me a little bit about yourself, where were you born and when?

J: Yes, I was born in Mexico in the state of Tlaxcala, in the town of Santiago Tetla. I was born there on January 9, 1934. When the Bracero visa came to be, I was included on the list of workers from my state. I enlisted there and had the opportunity to come as a Bracero. Would you like to ask me something about the journey or how we got here? Well anything about those things.

E: Yes, first I am going to ask you a little about, what your life was like in Mexico? And then we'll go on to talk about the procedure, the hiring process, and everything else, okay?

J: Yes.

E: Could you tell me a little about your family in Mexico? Was it big? How many brothers? How many sisters?

J: Yes, I was single. I was the only male in the family, and I had three sisters. I was a field worker back in Mexico. There weren't any other jobs, so that is why I only worked in the fields and when I had the opportunity to come here, I decided to take it. But as soon as I left leaves, the suffering was terrible. You might think it was really easy, but it wasn't; we really suffered a lot. I got hired in Empalme, Sonora, and there were thousands and thousands of men there from all over Mexico. And there was no place for us to stay there and have the services, all the services that we needed.

E: Where would you stay?

J: In private homes. They would charge us one peso for spending the night and sleeping on the floor, and they had toilets where they would make a whole in the dirt and, well you can imagine all those thousands and thousands of men. How overwhelmed with

bad odors those bathrooms must have been. It was a pain going to the bathroom. They would charge us one peso to eat. They called the food “*vamos a la gallina*” (Going to the chicken), but it was some beans and a couple of tortillas, that was all.

E: Pot beans?

J: Yes, pot beans, that was all we ate, and of course outside, where the city was a little bigger, there were restaurants. But we couldn't spend any money.

E: And where would you get the money to go to the hiring centers? Where did you get the money to go to Empalme, Sonora?

J: By pawning stuff I had back in Mexico; for example, I had a really good bicycle and I ended up pawning it. I did it thinking I was going to come here and make money, but it wasn't like that. I lost my bicycle because when I went back I was not able to redeem it. We earned very little pay here and food costs us. When we received our checks, deductions were already made for the food we ate and the other expenses we had, such as washing our clothes and things like that. So it wasn't like I thought it was going to be, that I was going to come here, earn dollars and better my life, it wasn't like that. Once hired, we took the train from Empalme, Sonora, to Mexicali and there we times when we had to walk all night.

E: Did you ever have to walk?

J: I just took the train but it wasn't suitable at all.

E: How was it?

J: Well it had good seats and it was shut because throughout the course, the train traveled really fast but we couldn't feel it. A lot of dust got in from everywhere. When we least expected it, our teeth were full of dirt and our clothes covered in dust because the dessert is full of sand, and like I said, the train wasn't suitable for those conditions. When we arrived at the frontier, we were really dirty and once we crossed, they took us to some halls and we spent the night there, but again just on the floor. Well the floor wasn't cold because it was very warm there. But there were a lot of animals, like some kind of big grasshoppers. The floor was full of these animals and throughout the night they would crawl and jump all over us. After that we would go through an inspection where they would take off our clothes, fumigate and examine us. They checked our private parts, searched everything, and covered us with fumigating powder. It wasn't

welcoming at all; we were rushed from one place to another. We didn't know that anything like that was going to happen to us, but I didn't like it, there was no need for any of that to happen. But what I say is that Mexico's government is never careful, they make arrangements, and it's okay that they are trying to make jobs available to us, but they should stick up for us at least a little. The governments should see that all the people coming from Mexico receive adequate treatment, but it's not like that. I got a chance to work with Japanese Braceros here in Oxnard, but their situation was really different. Their contract was for three years and they were well taken care of, and their campsite was really organized. It was really different compared to our circumstances. They gave Mexicans a contract for forty-five days, this time was only used to pick and choose personnel. Those who worked hard would get their contracts renewed and those that didn't would only work for those forty-five days and then they would get sent back. A lot of people would borrow money in order to be able to come here, thinking that they are going to earn dollars and they will be able to pay everything back, but it wasn't like that. It's a complete failure, there were times when we had hope that things were going to get better, but they didn't. It was a failure because, like I said, the governments don't do anything for us. They should have done things different so we would have had better treatment and more opportunities as people. But they make scams and I think is all to benefit the United States and Mexico's government, and they leave the people to suffer.

E: And we do everything based on necessity, always thinking about our family first.

J: And thinking about how much the dollar is worth in Mexico, we do the math and we think that if we earned enough we could make money fast.

E: How much did they pay you when you came here to work?

J: During that time they would pay eighty-five cents the hour.

E: In what year did you come here?

J: I got here in April of 1960.

E: How old were you when you came here?

J: I was twenty-five, almost twenty-six and I landed here in Oxnard. I stayed here for a year and a half as a Bracero.

E: They would renew your contract and you had to go through the same process again?
Or how was it?

J: Well the longest a Bracero could be hired for was eighteen months and that's how long I lasted. Other than that I didn't know if there was any way of renewing the contract, all they told me was that, that a Bracero could last eighteen months here and no more. After that, in two occasions, I went to work in Sacramento in a town named Dixon, California. It's near the University of Davis. I was there for only two months, but I was here in Oxnard for eighteen. The truth is that we earned very little and they still took away money from us, and what I think is wrong is that now they don't want to give us back what they took away. We are not asking the Mexican government for anything else. All we are asking for is for them to give us back the money they took away from our labor.

E: It was what you guys worked for.

J: Exactly, yes.

E: So during the hiring process, do you remember how much they charged you in order to include your name on the hired list? Do you remember how much they charged? Or they didn't charge you?

J: No, I can't lie; they didn't charge me for that.

E: So how did you get into the program and on the list? Because I know there was a long list of people that wanted to work. How was it?

J: An announcement was made everywhere regarding the state list, saying that whoever wanted to enlist, to do so. I'm not going to lie; I don't remember them charging me for it. I just went and I enlisted. I was one of the last ones to enlist and the list itself was sent to Empalme, Sonora. We waited there until they called us, but meanwhile all we could do was wait, it took quite some time.

E: Do you remember how long you stayed at Empalme?

J: I think I lasted fifteen days there the first time, because during the second time I was no longer included on the state's list. That time I was there much longer, I was there for about six months.

E: There in Empalme?

J: Yes, in Empalme.

E: And how did you do it to...well to sustain yourself?

J: We worked at a restaurant that served food to the Braceros there. We worked the whole day just for food, serving food to the other Braceros. We only worked for the food.

E: Waiting to be hired?

J: Well yea, exactly, just waiting.

E: So when you lived in Mexico, did you go to school? Or you didn't?

J: Yes I did, I finished elementary school. But back in Mexico I worked in the fields all the time.

E: At what age did you start working in the fields back in Mexico?

J: Well I think when I was eight, ten years old. At that age all of the kids are working with yokes strapped on to oxen, working the land, and doing whatever else is necessary. My father was a member of a cooperative farming system and he had communal land where we worked to sustain ourselves.

E: So you said you were twenty-six years old?

J: Let's put down twenty-six.

E: Twenty-six years old when you were a Bracero, right?

J: Yes.

E: Had you heard about the Braceros before that?

J: Yes, I heard from the ones that came as Braceros and then returned. They returned with different clothes, the kind you buy over there and at that age I was amazed by that. We would say how great it must have been by looking at how those people were dressed.

E: So it was curiosity what caught your attention?

J: Yes, it caught my attention, but I think the first Braceros had it better than the rest that followed. They went back with nice clothes and we wanted the same, and that was the temptation we had until, until...

E: Until you don't see reality, right? So you told me you crossed the frontier in Mexicali, right?

J: In Calexico.

E: In Calexico?

J: In Calexico.

E: And that's when they made you the examination?

J: Yes, that's where they make the examination.

E: And in Sonora, they didn't make you any examination?

J: No, not in Sonora. We just got hired there and then they would put us in a train heading to Mexicali, and once in Mexicali we would enter through Calexico.

E: So, they fumigated you?

J: Yes, here in Calexico.

E: Did they give you any other types of examinations?

J: Yes. They examined our private part; they would examine everything very carefully.

E: What about your hands?

J: Our hands as well to see if we were in fact field workers. I was a field worker since I was a kid.

E: So that means you didn't have any problems in that sense, right?

J: No, of course not. I also worked here in the fields for forty years.

E: Once you settled here?

J: Yes because during that time it was easier to obtain citizenship. I obtained my citizenship in 1962 and since then, I worked here in the fields for forty years.

E: And when you got here, you arrived in Oxnard? They took you to a field to work? Or, how did they assign jobs to all those people that came in the train?

J: Well some are taken to northern California, others to Yuma, Arizona, and others to this part of California, all throughout Modesto. I came to Oxnard. Supposedly this area was great, had nice weather, and that's why when the Americans that fumigated us were doing the revisions, they would say rude comments to us. They said: "You guys are lucky; you're going to God's land." I didn't know why, but after I was legalized, I noticed what a great county Oxnard was to live in. The time I have living here I have lived well; I haven't had any serious illnesses or anything like that. I think this climate is great for the organism, this whole place is.

E: How were your experiences on the job?

J: I was use to working in the fields since I was a little kid. I didn't have any difficulties working here in the fields, and that is why they allowed me to work a full year and a

half here. They never put up any obstacles and they never said I wasn't hard-working enough not to renew my contract. So in one word, I was tough. I put with any job, and once legalized, I was able to drive tractors and operate different kinds of machinery. It got better once I was legalized.

E: So after your legalization process, you were able to get a better job while still being part of the Bracero program? Or, how was it that you were legalized?

J: No, there was a law that didn't allow Braceros to operate machinery, to drive a tractor, because I knew how ever since I was in Mexico, but it was prohibited here. If they caught a Bracero driving a tractor, they would charge the employer five-hundred dollars for allowing them to do so, so that's why I could do it. I knew how, but I couldn't do it. That's how it was back then; a worker couldn't use tractors, so the Braceros had to do the hard jobs. There weren't any opportunities for us to work with machinery.

E: In what kind of job did you work in? Picking strawberries?

J: First picking strawberries and then I worked in a job called '*con azadón al cortito*' thinning-out lettuce, cabbage, and other crops you would find in the fields. When the plants grew we would pull off the petals, leaving just one at a time. That's a job where you have to be bent down the whole day. There were furrows that were almost a half of a mile long and I was only allowed to make two stops in the middle; I would get up and then wouldn't do it again until I finished. But many didn't even get up once; once they went into the furrow they would bend down and remain that way. Our bodies will get more use to being bent down than straight up. They were hard jobs but at the end we got used to them and were able to deal with them. Our bodies will get use to doing the job and then we'll do them easily. Yes, first a picked strawberries but it wasn't like today that they have plastic covers and things like that. The dirt was all there was.

E: And was it easy the thing with the *cortito*? Or when you stood up in the middle of the furrow, did they scold you or told you off? Did the foreman get mad at you?

J: Well yea, what they want is for us to work from the time we go in until we get out. But I did a good job and, from what I can remember, they never reprimanded me. But yes, it was really tough, that and other things, such as cutting celery. It was hard but I was

lucky, I was use to working hard and I had no trouble in that sense. I worked and worked hard, and I had strength and endurance to do so.

E: And when you got here to Oxnard, you said you started picking strawberries first, right?

J: Yes.

E: That's where you lasted the longest picking strawberries? Or where were you the whole year and a half?

J: I lasted very little picking strawberries and after that I followed the other crops, like lettuce and all of that. I did that for longer, I was in those fields working with all those different crops for nine months. After that I moved, or better yet they moved me, to picking lemons. I lasted another nine months picking lemons.

E: What was easier for you, picking lemons or lettuce?

J: Well picking lemons it's easier because it's done standing up and we don't have to bend down. What it's hard is filling up the big bags with lemons, and inside the gardens it gets really warm and we would sweat all the time. It has its good and bad things because we had to carry the big bag of lemons, because if we went back and forth with just a little at a time, we would fall behind and get nothing done. And it was contract-based there; they would pay us for the boxes we would fill.

E: How much would they pay you for each box?

J: Fourteen cents for each really big box, but everything was done based on the ranchers' own interests. If it was a rich orchard, it had good crops, they would pay us less and if the orchard wasn't so good, that's where they would pay us more. Where it was bad they would pay more and where it was good they would pay less.

E: And how many Braceros where with you? Because you lived in some kind of camp or, where did you live?

J: Yes, in Camp Buena Vista that's still there. There were ten thousand Braceros in three camps. One was called *El Pacifico* (The Pacific), which was for lemon pickers; another one called *El Tres Eses* (The Three S's), which was also for lemon pickers; and the last was were the Japanese stayed, but that one was apart from the others. They were where the water fountain is now; the camps were located on Rose and Fifth St.

E: Where did you guys sleep? Or where did you guys eat?

J: We slept at Camp Buena Vista in bunk beds and there was a big salon where we ate.

E: Did they cook for you guys?

J: Yes, there were cooks that prepared the food but there was a big problem when it was time to go eat, I had to make line. I had to make line for everything.

E: Because of the amount of people there?

J: Because of the amount of people that had to go to the bathroom, we were never able to bathe with hot water. We came from work really tired and we had to bathe with cold water because so many people were there, there wasn't any hot water left. Now, go to the bathroom we also had to make line; we had to make line for everything.

E: Were there bathrooms and showers and everything was okay with the place?

J: That there was, there were bathrooms and showers but it had cold water all the time. But to go to the bathroom I also had to make line, we had to make line everywhere. In one word, all of that was pure suffering. When we were back home we thought we were going to come here and make money and everything was going to be nice and easy; that wasn't true. Everything that happened to us was all suffering.

E: And everyone always comes from Mexico thinking that they are going to make a lot of money, right?

J: Yes, that's right.

E: Well yea, it's really hard.

J: Really, really hard.

E: What kind of food did they prepare you guys where you lived?

J: Well plain food, whatever was cheaper for the people feeding us, beans and whatever else; the same for lunch. Two bean tacos and two beef tacos, that was lunch and if someone slept in and got there late, they would only get four sandwiches and that was it. After working really hard the whole day, that was a very deficient diet for us. But it was like that; we always had to be alert and not be late to anything because if we were, we weren't able to get the better of the things they offered, but instead, whatever there was left.

E: And what woke you guys up? What was your alarm? What time did you guys wake up?

J: Well people almost never slept. Some had to get up to get in line to go to the bathroom, others to go to the diner, but it was a continuous hustle almost all day and night.

E: Could you recall a day, any day of the week, and, can you tell me what you did from when you woke up until it got dark? From what you remember.

J: Well on Sundays everything was calmer because many people went into town to eat. The place where we lived would clear up and some would go visit friends or family they had around. The amount of people there would decrease; that was on Sundays, but the rest of the week...

E: But the rest of the week was about getting up, working...

J: Yes.

E: What time did you get up to go to work? And at what time did your day end?
Regarding your working hours, what was your schedule like?

J: Well before going to work we had to wake up, minimum, at six in the morning. But there were some that would wake up at two or three in the morning to get their lunch and so they wouldn't have to make much line, because they had to be aware of the trucks that arrived from everywhere, sent by ranchers, that would take them to work. The trucks that came for people would be there and ready to go, and the crew whose turn it was to go, had to be prepared; there were three hundred crews. So they had to wake up early but there wasn't a specific hour, some woke up at a certain time and other at another. It depended on the people picking them up, they had to be ready by then but there wasn't a set time to wake up. We had to find a way to wake up on time and not be late.

E: How many hours a day did you work?

J: We worked for ten hours almost always.

E: From dawn to dusk?

J: Yes, from dawn to dusk.

E: And on the weekends, what did you guys usually do? Did you have any friends when you were in the Bracero Program?

J: I didn't meet anyone here, because not even from my home town were there any people. No, I didn't know anyone, and on Sundays we will wash our clothes and pass the time however we could.

E: You didn't go out to the nearby towns?

J: Yes, to the towns we did. We went here into town.

E: And what did you guys do? For example on the weekend, did you work on Saturdays too?

J: Yes, many times we did.

E: And on Sundays, what did you guys do? Did you go to church?

J: Well there was mass held at camp. A priest will go there and celebrate mass. We didn't have to churches.

E: Did many people assist mass, or not?

J: Well yea, many did. It was like that, many did and many didn't but there were more that did than those that didn't.

E: Did you have something fun at the camp? Something you had fun with? Or what did you guys do in your free-time?

J: We only had a radio; that we had. We had a radio in every room, which was all we had. There was a television only in the dining room, and that's where we had fun watching it.

E: You didn't play cards or anything like that?

J: Yes, many of the men played cards. I don't know if they bet each other or played just for fun, but yes, that there was.

E: Did you guys go out to the bars on Sundays or Saturdays?

J: A lot of people did, they went out to bars.

E: To drink, to play?

J: Yes, they will also go to the billiard halls to play.

E: Talk to me about some of the problems that there were at work, with yourself or with the people in your camp. Did you see any problems with the managers? Or something like that that you remember.

J: The only thing was that they were really strict, always behind us hurrying us up. They made sure we were bent down and working all the time. As foremen, they made sure

that the work advanced, that we did the job, and that we did the job right. They were really strict, that they were, but other than that I didn't have like serious a problem or anything like that.

E: So when you came here as a Bracero, were you single? Or did you have a family in Mexico?

J: I was single. I never got married in Mexico. I got married here and still am up to today. I had three daughters and one son here.

E: Did you meet your wife here?

J: Yes, I met her here.

E: Well once I was legalized, my wife started working in the ranch where I was working and that was where I met her. She worked in the nurseries where they planted celery and other vegetables. I worked in the fields driving tractors and that's where I met her, but that was after I was legalized. I was legalized in 1962.

E: After you were done with your year and a half as a Bracero?

J: Yes, after that.

E: How were you legalized? You processed your legalization? Or who helped you?

J: Yes, I processed my legalization. During that time they only asked for a support letter which said that if I became ill, that there was someone that would be able to support me economically. The work letter said that whoever gave it to me, promised to give me work, and those two letters were the ones they asked for.

E: And after that, they gave you your residence? Or what did they give you?

J: Yes, I had to go to the Mexican consulate. I had to go to the consulate in the city of Mexico. I had to go there and that's where I was able to become legalized, in the consulate in Mexico City. They just asked me a lot of questions there, that, if I had been to the United States? And I told them that I had, as a Bracero in certain places. They asked a lot of questions there and that was it. After that I was legalized.

E: After that, did you go back with the person that had promised you work?

J: No, during that time I was able to work anywhere else, going back to the person that gave you the letter wasn't a requirement anymore. I worked in one place for twenty-eight years with a Japanese rancher.

E: Did they treat you well there?

J: The Japanese are really tough; they are really strict when it comes to work, but I knew how to do the work, so I never had problems because of the work. I leveled the fields. I did it really well using tractors, but most of the time I was the one directing others how to do it and the boss saw that I was doing it very well. He would say: “Well if I’m going to make money, I’m not going to tell you anything, do it however you want.” In that sense I never had any problems. I worked as if I was the owner and everything turned out very well, the only thing was that the Japanese are really tough. In one word, they wouldn’t recognize the help we gave them and they didn’t compensate us for any of that. The only thing is that they are strict and very money-loving, but either way I knew how to do everything and...

E: You didn’t have a problem with that.

J: I didn’t have a problem, I had a good time.

E: That’s good. So after you ended your contract with the Bracero Program, did you go back to Mexico? Or did you stay here? What did you do after?

J: I just went back to Mexico to look for the papers they asked me for to get legalized. I had to go back to my town to get what they asked me for, my bankbook and my Mexican passport. I just went back for that and I stayed just for a short time. I couldn’t see myself in Mexico anymore and I liked my job here and all of that. I ended up coming back here but I still go to Mexico once in a while, but now I go less. You’ve seen how things are like now a day.

E: Yes. So when you went back to Mexico, you didn’t want to stay there anymore and you decided to settle and make your life here for good?

J: Yes, that’s right.

E: And then you came back and got married?

J: Yes, here.

E: Is there anything you want to tell me that may have caught your attention during your experience as a Bracero? I don’t know, something you liked doing to help you remember your family? Or how did you communicate with your family?

J: Well I only had my dad, mom, and three sisters back in Mexico. It was hard leaving them, but I knew my life would be better here because I knew how to do many things in the fields. You know that when someone gets a job here they don’t want you to be

absent, and in order to keep that job we have to stay here and go to work. When we finally notice, years have passed and we are old, and that's what happened to me.

E: Time flies and we don't even notice how, right?

J: Exactly, that's right. But as far as bad experiences as a Bracero, what I've told you before, that the governments have always tried to protect only themselves. They protect their families but they don't pay attention to anyone else, they don't do anything for us to be okay, they don't look for a way to make sure that we are treated right and to make sure where we end up at. This is what I say, if I were part of a government, I would make sure where they are going, what they are going to do, how they are going to be treated, and many other things. But they don't care about that; they only care about what's good for them and their loved ones.

E: The money, right?

J: Exactly, exactly.

E: And to finish

E: And to finish up, do you have a good memory, something you liked during you year and a half in the Bracero Program? Or something you consider the best or the worst? Anything you remember.

J: Look, I thank God that ended up here in the town Oxnard use to be. I'm going to tell you that I never seen paradise, but this was as close as it got to that. This town was very beautiful, the agriculture; there was a lot of open terrain here. Good terrains. Now they turned to houses, factories, and all of that. But that's what I had liked about here. It was a beautiful place here, everything was cheap, and everything was easy. There were a lot of jobs. During that time, there was a big concentration of people here in Oxnard and in all the nearby towns, like Santa Paula and all of those places. In other very important places too, like for example the San Joaquin Valley and many other places. California was a great place during that time. Now everything has changed, but I saw the great amount of people that were here, the Braceros working, and the piles of tomato boxes and other vegetables that were grown here. The productivity here was enormous, and that's what impressed me. Another thing that surprised me was that there were jobs all year round. A lot of people came here during that time. Now they have started building houses, agriculture has decreased, and that's why now there are

less people here. But there used to be a lot of people here and all of them had jobs. That was what impressed me. I'm not sure if this is being recorded but I'm going to tell you that I'm a Jehovah witness and they are preaching about a new world that is coming soon, and it makes me remember all the things that use to be here and how it used to be. Now they are announcing that the Earth is going to turn into a paradise and all of that pleases me. Soon everything is going to change and I don't want to say anything else.

E: No well thank you for your time.

J: Thank you.

E: And do you feel proud of being a Bracero? Honestly.

J: Well I do because that was the first step that allowed me to get to know the United States and that allowed me to come here. I got to know this place when it was absolutely beautiful. Now not so much, but like I told you, it was like paradise here, but now I know that Earth is going to turn into a paradise. God, Jesus Christ is going to bring paradise very soon. We're in the end of days.

E: But you are proud of being a Bracero, right?

J: Yes, of course.

E: Of everything you have, your family most of all, right?

J: Yes, and you know why? because I have always liked agriculture and working in the fields. I have always liked that, and that's why I feel proud.

E: That's good, I'm glad. Well thank you for the story you told us.