

Rafael Cortez

Transcription

Interviewee: Rafael Cortez

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Interviewer: Efrain de Santos

This is an interview with Mr. Rafael Cortez on October the 9th of 2008, in the city of Oxnard, California. The interviewer is Efrain de Santos. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project.

EdS: Good evening Rafael. How are you?

RC: Good evening. Just here doing our best at life.

EdS: Great! Great!

RC: And...

EdS: Well...

RC: Um, when, people had begun to go because there was going to be list for those who wanted to be *braceros*, there in my town, and my Dad, well, I told my Dad, "Hey Dad, they're going to make a list, for those who want to be a *bracero* in the United States. Why don't you let me go?" "No, no. You can't go because I need you here. I need all of my children here, I can't let them leave." For two months I had asked him for permission. In the end he told me, "Alright, I'm going to let you go." So I went to sign up, and there, they made the list of those who would go to Mexico City, to the Federal District, and there was a man, Jesus Martinez, who was in charge of the list and was very intelligent, that man, he knew a lot about offices, readings, and all about the town, he was once president and all that. Well, then, he takes the group to Mexico City, there we go, and, in a bus, and we're going to Mexico City, and well, we have never been to Mexico City, then we arrived and some of us went here, some went there, and we didn't know how to cross the street. We were there in La Alameda and all, and we took a while, we arrived and we stayed in some place, and we went to the stadium everyday for two months to see if we could be contracted. They gave us these cards that were green, then no, now they were going to use the ones that were a different color. Then another color, then another, and us, we said, "well what are we going to do?" So there we go after waiting and waiting, to close exterior relations or over where the big offices were, to verify why they didn't allow us, because we were running out of money and they wouldn't assist us, then there were like 3,000 people I think, or more, in the streets, we arrived at the offices and, a man, from Jalisco, the one who had spoken for us, said, "Look, what you guys need to do is stay here, until the sign your government cards." So we went and we stayed there until they assisted us. They finally signed our cards, some green colored cards that they had given us, for 75 dollars, then, another day, we went to the stadium and they told us, "those with the green colored cards enter," so we got into lines and of many

colors, and well we had entered and then, "What's your name? Show me your hands. Let's see if you have any calluses." Of course. I had calluses from axes. "No, no, no! You go, go! And where are you from? From *Michoacán*? Yeah. Come on, look at your hands!" So then, just like that, we were ready and he told us, "We're all ready. Now then. Go home and tell your families, and when a month has passed, come, this day, present yourselves, because you're going to leave on a train."

(Incomprehensible)

EdS: Rafael, before we get into further detail, tell me a bit about where you were born, and about your family.

RC: Oh. I was born in *Acuitzeramo, Michoacan*.

EdS: Excuse me? What was that?

RC: *Acuitzeramo, Michoacan*. There, my father was a person who, built homes. He was a poor man, he would ask for his animals so he could take trips because there were 13 of us in our family. And there were only three of us, three men, alive, and the rest, like four; there are only eight of us left. The others have passed away. And my father, well he worked and worked, he didn't want to let us come because we were the ones that helped him sow the crops. And, he didn't take us out of school. He would say, "Go to school. And when I need you guys, to sow the crops, then we will call 'em, to let me have you guys for a week, then you will return to school." Just like that, that's how things went. Me, what I earned was 25 cents a day. And, well my father built homes, he earned 75 cents a day and, my brother and the rest of us would help him with the work, with anything we could, we would sell some things, sell firewood, sell sugar cane, and well, we did what we had to, to make some money. Then, after I was contracted and I came, well, my brothers stayed, my two other brothers there with my father, and he gave me permission and we came, on a train, we came and went, all the way to Missoula, Montana. We arrived there to the beets. Ten of us men went there. And the rest of them, well, they would leave them in one place, in another, and, that's how we would go the train full of people. A lot of people would get off the train because they didn't know what to do. They would tell us, "Where you going?" "They're taking us off to war, and well, were going to work. We're going to work as *braceros*." "But they're taking you to war." "No, what war?" Here we came, (laughing) we came for six months, there in Missoula, Montana, we ran out of work, after six months, they brought us to Denver, Colorado, from Denver, Colorado they moved us here. Here to Hermit. We arrived in Hermit, in June, where there were a lot of apricots. There they paid us with money in envelopes, and, from there they brought us here to Limoneira, we stayed here, Limoneira, Piru, and Fillmore, and they had us here in Oxnard. We didn't make much but, to fill 100 boxes, of oranges, we made 12 *pesos*.

EdS: Okay.

RC: To fill 100 boxes of oranges, 12 *pesos*. They paid us, they charged us for food, and, we worked, well from Monday thru Saturday. Not on Sundays. We didn't work Sundays. We didn't work a Sunday. We would run out of work, of lemons, oranges, and they would make us chop wood from those eucalyptus trees. There we were with our saws, cutting, and cutting. And well,

I was saving all my money. I would always go to the bank, and I gave hair cuts on the farm. They would pay me five cents per haircut. I would save all my money until I had enough to buy a truck. In seven years. I saved the money and when I bought the truck, I went to see the consul and he told me, "Alright, bring me the papers to the truck." "Here you go." "Let me sign them for you." He stamped and signed them and said, "You can take it to Mexico and it will not cost you a dime, in Laredo, Texas, there will be someone to make up the paperwork for the truck." So I found someone who could guide me through the roads because, you had to go to Laredo, and go around through Mexico, Federal District, because you couldn't just cut through the terrain, there were no roads. There I was, happy with my truck. Once I arrived, in Mexico, they took me all the way to *Chapultepec*, and there they told me, "This is it, go this way, on your own, don't get off this road it will take you all the way." And well, I made it, I arrived in August, and it was raining a lot, and my truck wouldn't arrive to my house for another two months, because of all the rain. I arrived on a mule, (laughing) with all my, my little backpack because all my other belongings were in my truck. I took a bed, some tires, a stove for my mother, a battery operated radio, I took a lot of things, and it was all authorized by the consul. That's why I didn't have to pay a dime. Then, I took my truck and began working, hauling rocks, sand, everything, merchandise, beer, I hauled everything, and wood to build houses, and I lasted nine years with my truck. After two, after nine years I bought another truck in Mexico, I sold it and bought a bigger one. I spent ten years there, I wouldn't come back, then, I said, "well I'm leaving," my motor blew up, from my truck, and I had to come back to make some money, but not as a *bracero*, now as a smuggler, I entered and when I went again, then I got married, to my wife. Because here, without, I had a lot of friends girlfriends who wanted to marry me, but, I didn't believe it, I said, "I'll go back home and there I'll get married and all." Those who got married, are still there. Married with household duties (laughs), and that's how things were.

EdS: Rafael...

RC: Yah...

EdS: And did you learn how to read and write?

RC: Yes, I learned to write, do math, everything, and a little bit of history because I tried hard in school. But there wasn't anything passed the fourth grade, because we repeated the fourth grade, they didn't give us books for fifth or sixth grade, because there weren't any. They didn't send us books. We would read the same books over and over. The same books and stories, well, they were different. They would send us to the chalkboard, and people would come to examine us to see how we were doing, and they would say, "Oh, they're doing good. They're studying and learning, and all that," and that's how things were. Very poor. Still, it doesn't embarrass me to say, but, my mom would dress me, in white long johns with, my sash and *gabancito*. Just like the people from the rural areas. That's how she dressed us because, my father couldn't afford, to take the money to dress us well, not even a photo, nothing. A photo that I had, small ten, on a dog, you should see, I was here, about this size, no more, not even a photo. (Laughs) Until now, look, how the family has grown so big, photographs everywhere, with grandchildren, everything well... [incomprehensible].

EdS: Rafael, and how, how did they contact you or how did you find out about the *bracero* program?

RC: Well there, we got the news because, you find out very quickly, in Mexico, you find out very quickly. There were radios, but, not too much news, but people find out, when they would go to, go get the letters from the mail, they would find out, the news, of everything that was happening. Thereafter, they would go and tell people, "Well, there's going to be this and there's going to be a meeting of *braceros* and, now with the eruption of the volcano, it would be good to leave as *braceros* because, what are we going to here with so much sand?" that the sand was falling over the houses, and well, I was working for, with my father building a house and they paid me 25 cents a day, carrying the material to the top of the houses, for 25 cents, what do I say, or that's why I said, "let me go," 25 cents, when we arrived here I was making \$4.80, a day, ten hours for, 40 cents an hour. So I said, well I sent over, and my father would say, "Wow, so much money, look at my son, he sends me a lot of money." Well yeah. It was a lot of money. If you would send 100 dollars, then, it was 480 pesos. Right?

EdS: Yes.

RC: So I say, well after, when I would tell him, "Can I go?" He said, "Yes, go, hurry. But be very careful," my mother would also tell me, "Well be very careful. Don't be out over there," she said, because we knew that things were different here, well life there. There, people were in their homeland and they knew of everything that went on and, we came here, (sounds of a car in the background) and we didn't know what to do, we couldn't drive or anything, we would walk from, from *Campo del Arco*, from the end of Saticoy, the last street, we would walk all the way here, to Saticoy, and even here, to the theater. Yah. We would go walking, sometimes at night, well, we didn't know how to call a taxi. When we began to notice how things were, our own boss took us to the store, in a bus. He took us to the theater, to the dance, he treated us very well. I enjoyed all of it because, they would take us, and I would tell him, "Let me shift the gears on the truck." And he would tell me, "Look, this is first, second." So when I bought my truck, I almost knew how to drive. I would get stuck on a tree because I didn't know where reverse was. It had this hook, you would pull it like this, and that way, and the boss would say, "Look, pull here, move it this way then that way, then you'll go back." I said, "Alright, now it makes me happy because you showed me how to go back." Like that, that's how we got along, the time, and well, let me tell you, I saved my money, I, I didn't. I saved \$3,400 in seven years. That's what I saved. And my truck cost \$1,500, and everything, my canvas, and all that, and I was able to return with my money, over in my country because, well, I didn't spend it. I had it saved in the bank. A booklet filled, well I deposited, and deposited, and well, I worked hard, but, we didn't make much, we could if we wanted to, some made, maybe almost 30 or 40 dollars a day, but no, they paid, 10 dollars, and when it rained we didn't go. For 12 dollars a day. And in a hurry because to pick 100 boxes a day was, was to be practically running, to the very top of the ladder. And lucky. We never sat or, we didn't fall or anything, but yeah, I liked it a lot. And I tasted the water from here [incomprehensible] and here I come [incomprehensible] (laughing), so they could study here, they all studied here, already...

EdS: Rafael...

RC: ...nine in the family.

EdS: What would they call the bracer program? Did it have a special name?

RC: No, well they would say the meeting of the *braceros*. That was it...

[incomprehensible] (They speak at the same time)

RC: No, no, they didn't call it anything else, just as *braceros*, we came, we came to lend a hand. The *bracero* was the one who decided to lend a hand during the war. And, another thing, they would take all the men, and they left all the women here, for all of us that came from over there, there were a bunch of women, all the women were alone, they would take them to war. And when the war ended, they hit the sirens, I was up there, on a hill, in '45, the firemen were honking, and they said, "Hey, works over." "What happened?" "Let's go home. I'm going to pay you guys for the full day. The war is over." The war ended and, we were off to go home, everyone very happy. (Laughs)

EdS: Did you ever think about coming to work in the United States?

RC: Earlier?

EdS: Yes. Before this all happened with the *braceros*?

RC: But how? There was a man who came, his name, was Mr. Roque. He came walking. Because there were no trains, no buses. I don't know how he made it. But he made it to the United States. He worked here, he was the first to come. Like two or three, another man Silviano, a bus came as well, but when they repatriated everyone, but nobody talked about coming North, how would get here? We didn't know. My father said they came to, to Los Angeles, they paid one cent at the border, because they let them through. But, he didn't stay long, this was before I came, well, when he was younger. And well, he also saved his money. I don't know, six months he stayed, and he sent his money so they could buy him his cattle, and his animals so he could work over there. When he arrived, he already had his animals for work. Supposedly oxen, and there's a picture, where, where he's working with the animals, the oxen and...Rebecca...

EdS: What, What, Rafael, and what requirements did you have to, complete to be a *bracero*?

RC: Well, just present a birth certificate and show them your hands. They had to be those of a worker because there were some men, who had very soft hands, and they would say, "No, you must leave, and when you leave, you need to cut your hair. We want you to go with your haircut. Better yet, bald." And that's how we went, bald. They told us that at the border, there would be examinations, that we would all be given a physical examination. When we would get to the border. Well, we were all healthy because none of us had anything to hide, and yes, some, you could tell that where they were from, there wasn't a lot of water. They didn't bathe frequently. And well, they had lice, but me, no, when we went my mother would bathe us often and we were aware of things, we would walk a mile and a half or two to get drinking water. On

mules. On some occasions we used jugs, and that's how we would get what we needed. So, when we returned, after everything was settled, the *bracero* program was over. Things were different after that. My brothers had also come, and when we returned, we each built our own house, and we extracted water. There from the house. We dug and dug, with picks and shovels until we reached water, twenty five meters to the water, that's about seventy five feet. So much water came up, it was a big round hole, from here to there of round, and the water rose up fifteen feet high. We dug three water springs. They had very strong currents, and, the guy who was digging said, "Get me out of here because we're going to drown." That's how we got water. And then, everyone began making holes. Soon after came portable water, and sewage, then everything was different. The town became modernized, there were phones, a church, there was everything, very different from what it was before. In the streets the pasture was big, from so much grass. So the people rode their animals to work, and now it's very different.

EdS: Rafael. Did Mexican or North American officials ever tell you what to expect from your job?

RC: Yes, there was a representative who gave us English classes, advice, and they would tell us, "Look, now that the contracts are almost up and the want to renew another contract, good, and if not," (people talk in the background) hey they want to meet you...

Woman speaking: I'll be back I'm going to [incomprehensible]

RC: ...yes, spiders. The spiders don't see us then all of a sudden, they get scared. Well, yes, I was very excited and well, I was given the number...

(To another person) you didn't find it?

...38,000, I still remember, 38,700, that's the number I was given, from the numbers when I began that many people had already gone, 38,000. I was almost one of the first from that group. That were ready. We couldn't just go, everything was counted for, 500 would be ready, that one of 1,000 and...

(To another person) let me see Erica,

...here it is look, here's the paperwork. (Noise and people talking at the same time), it's from '46. (A woman and girl speak), well that and the contract may be from, it's from '46 but, when I came here well...

EdS: Yes

RC: well...

EdS: Rafael, and did they inform you about the salary you would earn and the food and...
(Rafael interrupts)?

RC: Yes. While we were on the trains, there was a representative on every boxcar. There they explained to us, "Look, when you arrive, please, with the first check," and who knows what,

“buy your clothes, socks, a lot of things. Buy your daily necessities.” They explained to us all that, and we noted those things, they gave us a lot of advice, we had a representative in the office that someone, came to complain, that he was mistreated, someone would go and, “I came to complain, I was scolded, or I was sick and they didn’t bring me medicine.” Then they would go speak with, well the foreman, about the packing and all because, we lived in the packing houses, us, and others lived in the camps. Here, there were camps everywhere. Over there, Saticoy, and Piru and all that, all camps, here on fifth there were camps. There was a camp there, Sels, it’s still open, we also went there, but, because we were here as *braceros*, we would arrive and just like that they would give us work, when we became familiar with the area, we would simply arrive, without papers but, right away they would give us jobs, that is to say they would give us four beds because we were already registered there.

EdS: And where did you cross the border?

RC: Through Ciudad Juarez.

EdS: Ciudad Juarez.

RC: Around Ciudad Juarez. That’s the route that goes to Montana, it’s near Washington. Montana is divided in coast with Washington.

EdS: And what happened, when you were in the reception center, in that place in *La Garita*?

RC: In *La Garita*? The train arrived, we got off, and we entered, to be revised with the doctor, and “c’mon, get on we are going to get on a different train.” We left to another train and it took us to, the train returned I think.

EdS: And did they give you a vaccination or anything?

RC: Yes they, gave us a physical examination, and they gave us, they gave us vaccinations for, some sort of diseases I think.

EdS: Let’s see. Describe to me *La Garita*. How was the reception area?

RC: *La Garita* was, a small office, small, a small lodge that you passed through, and the people from immigration were there because even to this day I know them. The immigration people were there with everything arranged, and revised, and they revised the documents that we had, we would return from there with our prepared documents. Those with passports, we had passports, but we were all contracted and we had everything we needed. We all arrived and “come in, come in.” And everything was revised and until they finished revising everyone that was on the train, then they said, “Alright now. Everyone grab some lunch and eat.” Everything was free. From the time we left Mexico, they gave us free meals. Sandwiches, and fruit. They dropped us off in Denver, Colorado, and they followed with *mariachi*. They had us in large halls there, to eat in a ...

(He addresses someone in the room) Shh. Don’t talk, we’re recording.

...and, they sat us in the hall and it would be full of people, and some would leave and another would fill and board the train again, some women with Mexican style dresses along with the mariachi played for us, man with what great happiness they welcomed us in Denver, Colorado, I had never had such a beautiful welcoming like that before, the way they welcomed all of us who came from over there. Girls, women, men and all, Americans and everyone applauding, it made them happy that so many people came.

EdS: Yes.

RC: Where did they find so many people (he laughs) in Mexico? They were coming and behind us was another train. A train arrived every day. That's how it went, one after another, and another...

EdS: Rafael, did you have an opportunity to choose the type kind of work that you wanted to do?

RC: No.

EdS: No.

RC: Everyone said, "This rancher is taking ten men. Ten men and there, you're going to harvest beets." So we were there, with no boss or anything. I was one of the men who knew more about the fields, and the man told me, his name was Eduardo, but I can't remember his last name, he told me, "You're in charge of the people. The ten men." He noticed that I knew how to use the hoe and, not me, not a foreman, he didn't pay me more or anything but, I would direct them, "Now, everyone get a number, one, two, three, four, up to ten." Everyone did their job. Then, when we would return to the same job, whoever did it wrong, had to learn how to do it right because, right away we got into picking some of the crop, with a machine in front of us, then we went along picking the cotton bushes, leaving only one or two, and with hoes, long and short ones, and we would return there were 170 acres that we cultivated.

EdS: And how much did they pay?

RC: They paid us, we worked ten hours, from the time we arrived until we left. Ten hours, everyday. And the rancher would give us milk, he gave us potatoes, and vegetables, he didn't charge us rent, he gave us a restroom, he gave us everything and we made our own meals, and we worked every day, we lived there. It's because we would go out and get right to work. We even walked. Closer than there. Well, around the house where we lived, everything was good. We never had trouble with anyone, we were all in agreement, because we were all from *Michoacán*. There were two men from Mexico City. We showed them how to work because they didn't know how. Their hands were really soft, and there they learned. After, when we left they said, "good thing you gave us those classes because, your dad taught you how to work well." I told them, "Yes, he taught us ever since we were like, seven or eight years old, and he showed us, well, to work in the field," and to this date we have not forgotten and my children, I also taught them how to work. And that they should go to school as well. And they went to school.

EdS: Rafael, how many years did you work, officially, as a bracer?

RC: Me, as a bracer only, about eight, nine years. Because I left, then returned from *Guadalajara*, as a bracer, some lists from, over in *Jalisco*, I came again, like another two years, three more. Then, when I left, that time, I didn't return I stayed to work with my truck, to work, on jobs, which were nearby. Then on large roadways. Then transporting livestock, fruits, I would go all the way to the capital. After, better yet, when I was here in my home town. Here I would sleep at home, I ate here, and when I was over there, all restaurants and, we slept on top of trucks, we didn't stay home, not even in hotels or anything. That's how, work was different. So, when I came here, almost twenty-five years, after everyone was ready, ready with their documents, we stayed because we liked it. We only return to visit. (Laughs)

EdS: Rafael, tell me about the place where you worked the longest. What was it like? How was it?

RC: I only worked there six months. Then I worked here primarily picking oranges, lemons, and [incomprehensible]. After my family grew, we would go here, to the strawberry fields, the tomatoes, then we would go to the grapes in Calistoga. There, I was the tractor driver, and I would bring the tractor with the gondola very close so that they could easily empty the buckets into the gondola, then I would keep moving, I only had my family there, I already had six of them working.

EdS: Rafael, so, did you work with other *braceros*? And did you make lasting friendships?

RC: Well we all got along. Yes, I have [incomprehensible], I still have *compadres* that are in Los Angeles, who are still alive, and I have another *compadre* who lives here, he came when I came. I called him yesterday to ask if he wanted to come. He said he didn't, he didn't feel good, from, he fell and, he didn't feel good, he didn't have anybody to bring him and, he wouldn't accept. We could talk over the phone if you would like. No, if not that's fine.

EdS: Rafael, were there people on that same farm that were not *braceros*, that were there illegally, who were working?

RC: Oh, yes. There were in the fields. In the *bracero* camps there were no illegals. They were there in the fields, there were illegal workers, after they had ended the *bracero* period. Then they would arrive at the camps, and that Immigration was coming, and some would run, others would hide in the houses, it was a disaster. But, they always let us work. And there was an airplane, and it would come down and chase them and they didn't ask, it was very bad, when they would chase them like that. They didn't know if they were going to work, they wouldn't come home because, they would come out of nowhere. Immigration would come out and stop them right then and there and kick them out. But, they would kick them out, and the next day they would return. They kicked me out once, from [incomprehensible], they threw me out and I spent three days getting to Santa Ana, without eating or drinking water. In three days, me and another man came through the mountains and desert.

EdS: Rafael. Another question. Did you have contact with your boss and your family when you were a *bracero*?

RC: Yes, we would write letters. The letters would take, up to a month to arrive, a reply. They would tell me, how I've been. I was fine, I was, and I was going to take them a lot of clothes, and take them this, and the shirts were fifty cents. The pants as well. I took a large suitcase, I still have it at my son's house somewhere, a large suitcase full of clothes.

EdS: Also Rafael, did the Mexican or American authorities ever go to your work place?

RC: Yes. Only our representative would go. We had a representative, per group. We were a group of ten, and he would visit us, "How you guys doing? How is the boss treating you guys?" "Well, really good. Just here working." "And are you guys working comfortably?" "Yes, were fine, no problem at all." We were there and, never had a problem, we completed all of our contracts and, they had nothing to say about us because, we came to work, and those who came to work and never said anything, well what problems could they have? Never any problems, we never grumbled, "Do this," we did it. And that, "Today well, you're all going to, there's food here, we're taking you on a bus, okay then, get ready because we're leaving," there, we washed our clothes and spent our time, there were radios, there wasn't television yet, but there were radios, and in order to buy shoes we needed them to give us a stamp. If not, we didn't buy shoes.

EdS: Rafael, did immigration ever go?

RC: There?

EdS: There, when you were a *bracero*.

RC: No.

EdS: No.

RC: Never. We didn't even know them. We didn't know anything. We knew the police, when we would go to, town. We would go to the theater. We would go drink coffee at a restaurant. Like that. But, none of us that were there, we never got into trouble with the police, nobody, none of us drove, that's why I say there were no problems, and those who drank beer, once they were like, they drank beer, they wouldn't sell it to me because I was only eighteen, seventeen or eighteen, they wouldn't sell me beer until I was twenty-one, then they began selling us beer, then, we would go, we would go to a restaurant and, we would order, some chili beans, with a hot dog, that's what we ate. Not, like now, that there are restaurants with tacos and all that. There wasn't anything. (Laughs)

EdS: Rafael, and did you have to pay for your food, or...

RC: Yes.

EdS: ...was it given to you?

RC: We would buy food, such as meat. He would usually just give us vegetables, rice, and milk, and he would give to us because he had livestock. We would only go buy, a few small things at the store.

EdS: And all the things, like personal items, like a toothbrush, tooth paste, soap, towels?

RC: Yes, that we needed to buy when, when we arrived, they gave us money. They gave us a pay advance so we could go buy our own things such as, toothpaste, soap, and all that, and, we went to buy all that.

EdS: And what was your home like? What furniture did you have? What can you tell us about that?

RC: It was, a house, for ten people, a very big house. Like a *hacienda*. There was a kitchen, with wood stoves, and the beds, there were restrooms, everything was there. Everything was well arranged. And between all of us, today is so and so's turn to clean, now today this, and we kept taking turns, and today, it's my turn to wash, by hand, I washed or there were three others, we had people who washed. There weren't washing machines, but we washed with, there was water.

EdS: Did the restrooms have drains?

RC: Yes. They had drains like, to simply dig a hole. Very deep. The restrooms had water.

EdS: Mmm.

RC: They had water from, the water that people put in them, from a sink, they would fill the toilet bowl because there weren't any of those that you could flush and it would shoot out water. We would get water and, pshhh, a bucket of water, and we kept the house clean. It didn't smell bad or...

EdS: Yes.

RC: [Incomprehensible]

EdS: Rafael, how and how much did they pay you?

RC: They paid us, with a check, made out to our names. They made out checks to everyone, we would go cash them in town.

EdS: And how much was it that you got paid?

RC: They paid us every, every two weeks. They paid us about, seventy *pesos*. Seventy dollars, like, 100 something a month.

EdS: And how would you send money to Mexico?

RC: We would go to the post office. We would send a letter, certified, and it would arrive there, a check, a money order. From the post office. They would sell them to us. And we would put it in the envelope, seal it, and it would arrive certified.

EdS: And did all the *braceros* get paid equally?

RC: Everyone. Nobody got paid more.

EDS: And did you ever have any problems receiving your earnings?

RC: Never. Always, the day would come, and right away they would bring our checks. "Here here."

A check for everyone. Beetroots like this. We would grab them and throw them in the trucks, we would start by cutting and cutting, with machetes. A tractor would go along loosening them up and we would get them and cut and cut, then up and up, and he said he would give us a bonus. But in the end, because we didn't finish the job, because of all the snow, he brought us special clothes and gloves, and clothes like that for the cold, and said, "We can't do this anymore. What I'm going to do is, bring a conveyor to bring them up." So he brought the conveyor, and it would bring them up so, he took us and turned us in over there and said, "Now men, have a good one, and if I need you and you go to Mexico, and you need a recommendation, I will give it to you. So you can set up your documentation." But when I got my documentation, there was no need for help from there. I had, other friends who helped me get my work permit, things were different. Then, after I brought my family over, I searched through my job, and finally they gave me letters for my family.

EdS: And did you ever receive your special payment? Did you receive the payment that they had promised you?

RC: No. they only gave me 300. 300 *pesos*.

EdS: And did they at anytime...

RC: Only on the first contract.

EdS: Oh.

RC: And from the contracts here, that they were going to give it to us, they haven't given us anything, who knows when they will?

EdS: And did they ever deduct money from your salary?

RC: Well there, when we got paid, there were deductions for, insurance, it was already deducted. That's why they gave me that money, over in Mexico. 300 *pesos* but, there it was a fortune.

EdS: Yes.

RC: I can't really remember how things were but, we spent it, we went to the theater, (laughs) and we arrived in three days, to *Michoacan*, and we got there with about half of our money. We were there looking at the women from, from La Alameda, (laughs) I had never seen, people like that, with such high heels, some had boots, and we were there watching them, and they would tell us, "Hey, [incomprehensible]." (Laughs)

EdS: Rafael, did you ever have any problems at work?

RC: No, not at work. No, never. We would get sick. I got sick from, a bump I had here, and they took me, the boss took me to the doctor, and he operated on me, here at the hospital in Ventura, he operated and I was there for a week, and he would go visit me and, he picked me up, then he said, "Don't leave until you get better," and so I stayed there. They fed me and all but they didn't pay me but, they didn't charge me for food, and everything turned out alright. At least they cured me, right?

EdS: Yes.

RC: Yah.

EdS: And what were the most common complaints? Either about the food, the boss, the salary, the lodging.

RC: Well, no, we were well attended to. There weren't any claims about anything, that they treated us bad, no. They treated us, very well. They took us to the store, to the theater, to the dance, everywhere, every week in a special bus, and the food they gave us in the camp, they would ring a bell, ding ding ding, and we would line up waiting for the food. The lady that would serve us was still there, that day, and the grand children were there, they went over to talk to me, "You knew the lady?" "Yah, I knew her, she was very young." They asked a few questions. Would you like a refreshment?

EdS: That's okay. Rafael, and what would you do if you didn't like your job? What could you do?

RC: No. They wouldn't change it. Once, I told them, I didn't like picking lemons, because you had to pick with these metal rings, the number seven. And there were so many lemons, that there were six, or five. I told them I had trouble, "It doesn't matter," he said, "You're going to work [incomprehensible], cleaning the orchards." Fine. They then took me to the orchards, with a hoe, and there we were, a group of five or six, and the grass work ended, and then they started growing oranges there, in Piru, they took us there to pick oranges, and I ended up staying there. I stayed because I liked it there, how they treated a lady there who was from Guadalajara, she gave us Mexican food, I was happy there.

EdS: Yes.

RC: The camp there.

EdS: Rafael, and did you encounter any type of discrimination?

RC: No. there were restrooms, Mexican food, we played poker, and we would go to town, to hear the people say, "Hey you're from Mexico," never. They really liked us. I'd say they really appreciated us because, they never yelled at us saying things like, "Hey *braceros*, what did you come here for to take our jobs?" There was never any of that. I never heard any of it.

EdS: And while you were a *bracero*, did you ever participate, along with your co-workers in any organizations, or in any labor protests?

RC: No. Not while I was *bracero*. After, when we were already here, we would go to the grape fields, there with Chavez, it started, strike, strike, and we were there, so that they would pay us a little more, things were settled quickly. The boss made agreements with Chavez, and well, pay them, you're already paying them twenty four cents per bucket, well, pay them thirty four cents per bucket. So then, he started paying us thirty four cents, and they kept raising it to forty four and ultimately they paid us a dollar per bucket.

EdS: Mmm.

RC: Once they paid us a dollar per bucket, we would make up to, up to \$1,000 or \$1,500 a week, with the entire family of course.

EdS: Yes.

RC: Yup.

EdS: Rafael, you spoke to us about your pastimes, but, how close, how close was the, the closest town to where you lived?

RC: (Laughs) It was, well, from where we were, it was further than Ventura.

EdS: What was it called?

RC: The town? Missoula. Missoula, Montana.

EdS: And was there a Catholic church nearby?

RC: No, we never found out about a church, no one would go and no one would come, to explain things to us. We didn't have time. Nothing but work, and we would go along the tracks. The train tracks. And the boss told us, "Look, if you see any porcupines, don't throw rocks at them. And if you see deer, there's a lot of deer and porcupine were you guys are going," and we would make them angry. There were pigs, that when you made them angry, they shoot needles. They shake and shoot, needles that they have stuck to their bodies. And he told us not to make them angry because they are mean. And when we would come from town, we would come across train after

train, all along the tracks until we would arrive, I don't know why we didn't get a taxi. Maybe he would charge us a lot. I don't remember why or, maybe we wanted to walk, I don't know. Only, when we were getting to leave, I had forgotten my money, that I had saved, my money, I had left it at some place. So then I went in a taxi, and told him where it was, I think it was about \$200 that I had left. So the taxi took me, I paid him five dollars, I should have paid him but I had my money, it was still there, I opened the house and took my money, good thing I had found it. So then they, "get ready because you're leaving, to Mexico, once again free the entire way." (Laughs) And then we boarded a train, and there we went.

RC to EdS: Where are you from? From what, what part?

EdS: From *Aguascalientes*.

RC: So that's how we went, from *Guadalajara*, they took us aboard a train, to *La Piedad*. And from *La Piedad* to [incomprehensible] *Zamora*. And from *Zamora* in busses, they took us to town, "Alright, that's it, we're here, we're done."

EdS: And while you were a *bracero*, did you go to Mexico on vacation?

RC: No, never. Since I came I never asked for permission, to leave on vacation. I wouldn't leave until my contract was up.

EdS: Listen, Rafael. And how did you guys celebrate festivities, such as Holy Week, Christmas?

RC: Overthere, November 20th is celebrated with, a band, a parade, and night time serenades. You give the girls flowers during the serenade.

EdS: That's in Montana?

RC: In the town square.

EdS: But I'm saying, when you were a *bracero*, how did you celebrate those days that were special to you?

RC: Oh, well it was a beautiful thing because, there were no festivals here, we would go there, we already knew about the festivals there, and there were merry-go rounds and everything. A man had made a merry-go round, and everyone in the town wanted to ride it. It would become full and, oh well, wait for another turn. That's how it was. On the holidays, November 20th, September 16th, and others, well the churches were closed. So after, they began to open, that was about, until '48, that's when they opened the churches. There were also town festivals, from the church. But those were about the revolution, and the times when there was, yah, not too.

EdS: Rafael, and after completing your contract, how difficult was it to obtain a new contract?

RC: Well, people would find out, now in this place, that over there in, Guadalajara they're contracting, that in *Empalme* they're contracting, and then they would come and obtain letters,

from, the cotton growers, they would give them letters and they would go with their letters that they had obtained and they would come, I didn't get a chance, I was only able to say that I was, from a place in Jalisco and [incomprehensible], that's why I came, I think two, I only got contracted about three times, like four times, I came under contract. But the largest one was the one from, from here, that was the, where I spent the most time, maybe because I enjoyed it the most, and they would give us annual contracts, for a whole year we could go without having to renew anything.

EdS: Okay. And what needed to be done to obtain authorization to return to the United States to work?

RC: Well, get a letter from the presidency, a birth certificate, that's all you needed like a letter of reference from town. After everything, you would present your letter, your birth certificate, and let's go, go to town, and right away you would get in. It was easier than when you had so much in Mexico, and, you would spend two months [incomprehensible]. And here, you only waited one week and it was easy. It was already, more organized, the whole *bracero* thing in the North, they asked for so many requirements and nothing.

EdS: And did you ever quit your job as a *bracero*?

RC: No, never. Always, I didn't, that I wouldn't go today because, I had a headache from a hangover, I didn't drink, so that's I say no. I never missed a day of work.

EdS: And did you become a citizen of the United States?

RC: Yes.

EdS: When?

RC: In '98. I became a citizen because everyone else was already a citizen, my daughter said, "Dad, you too, and lets go here now that you're at the table as an elective, you will return in five years," now here in the, they gave classes, and we signed up. So then, the questions, my wife as well. I only learned thirty. That's all I learned. My wife learned 100. She learned all 100 of them. And we went, and they only asked me in Spanish, and with the little English I had learned, I responded in English, I answered some questions on a paper, and there was this question, which I didn't get right. It said, that if we believed in the Constitution. And we wrote that we did believe in the Constitution. So then, he would say it differently. So then another consulate came and said, "What's the problem?" And well, "They do not answer me." "Yes," she said, "Yes, they are answering you correctly, you're the one who isn't asking the question correctly." The other consulate told her, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then she signed my paper, and my wife's, and we all became citizens. Those of us who were born here, only two of us were born here. The rest of us in Mexico. Only two here. One in Riverside and the other in Santa Elena. There are nine of us in the family.

EdS: Rafael, tell me about your life after having worked as a *bracero*.

RC: Oh, it was much different. I worked like, as my own boss. So then, the money we made, we went to Mexico, and there we worked in the fruit. We worked, selling fruit and my children bought it from different places, it was different, just that things got bad over there, and we spent fourteen years there. So we came because, there was, they made another market, a fresh food market, it was no longer [incomprehensible], we were in the [incomprehensible], and we left it all because the places weren't ours, they were only for rent, you just had to pay monthly rent, and that's where we sold goods, and we came, so that the children could go to school, and they all got married here, and, we left the business behind. My kids no longer wanted to, keep going, so they came, that's how it ended, but yes, we lasted fourteen years there, and we made progress. Then it ended again. (Laughs)

EdS: Rafael, what does the term "*bracero*" mean to you?

RC: Oh well, to me it, now, when I wasn't here it was something, when they stopped it they told us, "Look, this is going to end," it was a representative, "This *bracero* thing will end, so, were going to give you green cards, but you need to go to Mexico, and arrange those cards, then you will be able to work wherever you want, you could live wherever you want, they will pay your insurance, we no longer have anything to with it. The opportunity is going to be given to you, those of you who came, go apply, work it all out in two months." So I went, I got my passport and went, they sent for me in two months, to go, they gave me the documents. Yes, my visa. In two months I settled everything. There was no need for *braceros* because I had my green card. I would come as a migrant not a *bracero*. It was different now. As a *bracero*, you ate what they gave you, and here it was different, now we ate, some eggs with chili and, a beef stew just the way you liked it, not there, there you ate out of cans, they made milk from powder, but that's the way you ate at the camps, and after, that part changed and they bought a car, it was different now, you could actually have a girlfriend because you now had a car, they would speak English to one another, it was very different, from *bracero* to, documented. Oh yes.

EdS: How do you feel about being called a *bracero*?

RC: It makes me happy. For them to call me that, because I never, I was never here undocumented. Always just a few days. And, they gave us a chance to work. You could even go out and they wouldn't stop you, there weren't very many immigration officers. They let you work.

EdS: In general, are your memories of having worked as a *bracero*, positive or negative?

RC: Positive. They are positive and, I remember, I can't forget this because, it was, such a beautiful thing, that after I (the telephone rings) earned twenty five cents a day... (pause. He answers the telephone) as I was saying, my daughter Lupe was the one who would tell me, "Dad, why, why don't you tell the story about, when you came as a *bracero*, and all the hardships you faced, and where you came and all that," because we did come, we arrived, well, you could say, but yes, on clean fruit and all that, my children helped me and we made it, to sell up to 300 trailers in *Nogales*. Full trailers, that's how much they would buy from me, trailers, three or four truck loads a day. And I would sell it all. We made it but the bad thing was that they shut down that market, it was a direct order, "The market is closed, we made a new one over there, go

there.” I didn’t want to go, I didn’t want to get a place but, there places were worth 5 million, and you only had to give 300,000 as a down payment, and the rest in payments, for ninety nine years. So I came, and it went well because I started a pension, my children went to school and started careers, they found boyfriends, and got married. (Laughs)

EdS: Rafael.

RC: My wife and I have stay here and, our grandchildren come over after school. Would you like some water?

EdS: It’s okay, thank you. Rafael, did being a *bracero* change your life in any way?

RC: Yes, yes it changed. We were good guys who came from over there, never, we never knew that there were drugs or anything. Over there, the only thing we spent money on was sodas, a piece of bread, and there were glasses of wine and all, you could have a drink but, only the older men had drinks, we didn’t.

And since I came, there has to be someone, who comes next right, it’s always the same guy, with more experience and places he knows, but, I returned to town, with joy and, I didn’t want to do more than the others, I worked for whoever needed me to work, without any differences. I had an agenda, and I would write in it so and so needs this, this day you go here, at such place, and like that, taking care of my business. And well I felt, after being on a mule, and later in a bus, through the mud and all, like those above who, they filled the buses with people, and they would go to town to buy their things and, [incomprehensible] very, how do they say, it was great. (Laughs) I’m not one with words but, I’m just speaking the truth. Right?

EdS: Any other comments you would like to make to end this interview?

RC: Well, about my father I don’t want to say anything because, their one’s parents but, they were tough on us. Well, if it was a matter of us misbehaving, right. If we wanted to fight with others. That really brought on that kind of attention.

EdS: But in terms of the word *bracero* or your life as a *bracero*, any comments?

RC: Well, no, just that I am very thankful that, you have given me this opportunity because, I never imagined it, the hopes I had to come here, two months asking my father and in the end he let me. And I, gained so much, so much love for my father because he let me come here, because he didn’t want to, and he only let me come, he didn’t let my older or younger brothers come, just me. About, sixty, forty, forty three, in forty...

EdS: Sixty five

RC: Yes.

EdS: Sixty five.

RC: Yeah. I can't forget, so many memories (telephone rings) just as if it were happening now, I don't forget any of it. I have it very well saved.

EdS: Well Rafael, we want to thank you in advanced for your support, to the *bracero* project. We would like to thank you for all your work to this nation.

RC: Yes.

EdS: For all your experiences. For all you have contributed to this country.

RC: Yes.

EdS: We would also like to thank you in advance on behalf of the University of Channel Islands, for your support through this interview so that the story of the *braceros*, well is written, and that it survives, forever. Forever so that new generations have an opportunity to learn, a bit about, what our fellow citizens, what the Mexicans did, in this country at a time in which it needed it the most during the second world war.

RC: Yes, I say, even if they haven't finished giving us, the money that they had saved for us maybe we will get it later, we will not know for sure when one day it arrives, like right now in Mexico, to those in their seventies, the federal government is helping them. They are giving them medicine, they are giving them money every month, things are different now, and I say if I lived there now, I would qualify for that too. Because it's for people seventy years old or older. They are giving them food, public services and it seems that things are good in that aspect. During the time that I lived there I also signed up but, because I came here, I couldn't go back, and if you're here you can't, be going over to collect the 600 dollars that they give you each year.

EdS: Yes.

RC: That's what the federal government is giving them. No questions asked, just that it is money from the federal government. It's not committed in any way. And all that has helped the people, there are a lot of people waiting, to receive that money, and they gave them that money, and a lot of people stayed quiet because, either way they are getting a little bit of money. Right? It helps.

EdS: Well, yes. Well we really thank you very much, from the bottom of our hearts your support to this project...

RC: Yes, I enjoyed it.

EdS: ...to, share with us you experiences as a *bracero*. For taking the time to be with my partner Cristina and I.

RC: Ah, Cristina lives here in...

EdS: We live here in Oxnard, yes.

RC: Ah, yes. Cristina.

EdS: And well many...

RC: Is she your helper?

EdS: No, she's from the school, we're classmates from the program...

RC: Oh the program...

EdS: Yes.

RC: Very well then, I congratulate you and work hard and you know, I'm here if you need another short paragraph well, we can add it.

EdS: Very good. Thank you very much Rafael, God Bless.

RC: And, you will give us a copy of...

EdS: Yes. We're doing that now.

RC: It's fine.