

Interviewee: Nicolás Alvarado

Interviewer: Amy Jimenez

Underlined text: Transcriber describing actions

AJ: Where and when were you born?

NA: I was born on July 25th of 1932.

AJ: Talk to me about your family. Was it a big family?

NA: Well, I was the firstborn of my siblings. I was raised as an orphan because I never got to know my father. I'm not sure if my father had died before or after I was born, but my grandparents raised me. So I wouldn't have any problems, my grandparents took me in and they raised me, until I was older. As time passed and I started to grow up, I began to leave the house, now that... because at the age of eight I started working in the field just like everyone else. I had to work at that age because we needed it; times were tough during that time. I began to work and grew up a bit more, then came my first trip over here in 1950.

AJ: Let's go back a bit. Your grandparents were pretty much your parents? Pretty much, they brought you up as parents?

NA: Yes, like parents. Like I said, my grandfather raised me as his son because I never got to know my real father.

AJ: How did they earn a living?

NA: Well, they were peasants, they planted, they farmed and such, but in those days times were very difficult for everyone, not just for some. The poverty was very difficult for everyone; there was nothing but poverty during that time and well, that's how we got to where we are, bit by bit. As time passed on, my grandfather died, which left just my grandmother and I. I was about fourteen, I think, when I was left to provide for my grandmother [...] to support her however I could until I was fortunate to come over here, which was in 1950, when I came over here for the first time [...]. It was a bitter pill to swallow because, one time when we crossed the border, [...] illegally of course [...] through Algodones to California, it was difficult because, we crossed over in the afternoon, around five p.m. We arrived in a small town by the name of Ogilvie [?], California, and went to a market to buy some bread to eat, [...] because it was going to be a long walk. We brought two bottles of water for the four of us, one of those four was an uncle of mine... and he had been working in trucking with a gentleman there, which was from where I was from, he was the foreman. So when we entered the market, my uncle saw a gentleman that had been a co-worker of his and greeted him, "Where are you guys headed?" "Well, we are headed off to find some foreman that we have been looking for." He said, "Well I know that he is pretty far away from here, somewhere over by Indio." "They had told us that he was somewhere near

here.” “Well,” he said, “How about we go to my house so you guys can have a taco to eat.” He then took us to his house, he fed us dinner, and after that, he said, “now, may God be with you.” So there we went, continuing on. Well, we walked for four days and four nights until we reached the place we were looking for, only having eaten the dinner that the gentleman had given us four days prior and only drinking our water. Only after those four days did we eat again. There weren’t too many places where we could stock up with water, other than where they stocked water for the trains. Nowadays, we don’t have that problem; we can fill up with water pretty much anywhere. That was one of the hardest adventures we encountered. Finally we arrived in Indio and then took a train to Los Angeles, then from Los Angeles we met up with a friend who let us borrow money to take another train up north to Stockton, California. From there we walked towards the outskirts of Sacramento, in which we found work. We lasted one month before we were deported back to Mexico.

AJ: And all this was before you started the Bracero Program?

NA: Yes, it was before, [...]. We continued to cross over and they would continue to deport us, that’s how life was, until I signed up for the first time for the Bracero Program.

AJ: Let’s talk a bit more about that. How did you hear about the Bracero Program? That is, how did you know that this type of work was available?

NA: When I began to work as a Bracero?

AJ: Yes, how did you know?

NA: Well I went to... there were sign-ups in Irapuato, Guanajuato and well I am from a small ranch in La Piedad, Michoacán which isn’t too far from there. So I went to Irapuato where I was lucky enough to be chosen to work, which was my first time [...] in 1955.

AJ: Did they have a special name for the Bracero Program in Mexico or did they just call it, the United States Bracero Program?

NA: Yeah, just Bracero, [...].

AJ: Was everyone aware that you were a Bracero?

NA: Yes.

AJ: When you were selected to work as a Bracero, were you living in Mexico or were you in the U.S.?

NA: Well I was living... I was going back and fourth and also being deported time and time again, [...] but I wasn't satisfied, I couldn't resist coming over to the U.S. Until finally I was hired, but things didn't go so well for me because the contract was only for forty five days and when we were about to start the Bracero Program...

AJ: Before you begin to talk about the Bracero Program, can I ask you something?

NA: Sure.

AJ: Why weren't you satisfied? Because you mentioned that, "you couldn't resist coming to the U.S." What exactly were you looking to find in the U.S?

NA: Times were tough living in Mexico. I used to plant, I was a farmer also, but we lost the crop that year due to too much rain. That year I used my own money to plant, even though I was used to working for a boss. I rented some mares and used them to help me plant [...] for myself, right? But when we began to work that season, it started to rain and it continued to rain for fifteen days and we lost everything, the entire crop was lost. Luckily that year I signed up to work as a Bracero and also, since I had already rented those mares I was able to pay off the rental fee for the mares with what I earned as a Bracero. We ended up in Merced, California harvesting peach, but what happened was, that in Merced, there were a group of Americans who always got to harvest first, before us. Then we followed harvesting everything they left behind, which was nothing but rotten peaches [...]. They would drive us in the truck, which we would use to transport the harvest, and then later they take us back to pick out the goods ones, because a lot were bad. We would select the good ones, only leaving us with a few boxes. Later, we would do it again, select the good ones, lastly leaving us with hardly anything. In short, we barely made enough to pay for the room and board, and that's how we spent those forty-five days. During those forty-five days, one day we were put on a brand new orchard, which I recall was on September tenth of that same year. That day they put us on the new orchard first, and well, it was the only day that we harvested a lot, only one day out of those forty-five days! Finally our forty-five days were up and they deported us back! After that, I continued to look for more work.

AJ: That was the first time you were hired?

NA: That was the first time I was hired to cross over.

AJ: If we can, let's talk a bit about the hiring process. What was the process? That is, were there requirements to becoming a Bracero? Did they demand anything from you? What did one need?

NA: First of all, one had to sign up on a list.

AJ: In Mexico?

NA: In Mexico, that is where we were chosen, in La Piedad. There weren't many requirements. Only that one had to be a farmer, be selected from the list and bring identification, which was pretty much what they asked for.

AJ: Was the list long? Were there a lot of people on the list?

NA: Well, the list weren't too long; there were about one hundred to one hundred fifty people on each. The problem was the crowd that was gathered around where the sign-ups were held. There were so many people that when my name was called, I had to be carried by the people to the front; finally there was room to breathe. That's how they did it back then, you had to be quick to get to the front when your name was called.

AJ: So you had to be fast when your name was called out from the list?

NA: Yeah. The only way you could get through all those people was over them until they got you to the front. Yeah well, I was just fortunate to have been picked during that time. That was the first time I legally came over here to work.

AJ: Did you have to have any medical exams done before you were able to work?

NA: Yea, there was a few in Mexico. We had another one done when we arrived here, that one was done in El Centro, California, where they did all the paperwork for everyone. Also, that was where you found out where you were going to work and for whom you were going to work for.

AJ: What about the Mexican or U.S. authorities, did they tell you anything about the type of work that you guys were going to encounter or did they not say anything at all?

NA: No, they didn't say anything at all besides, "You are going here and you're going to do this." They didn't say anything about whether the job was going to be a good job or a bad job, just that, "This is the job your going to have and this is the place you are being sent to." We just hoped for the best.

AJ: So then, they also didn't give you any information as to how much you were going to get paid or what living conditions were going to be like?

NA: No.

AJ: What about any information about the food?

NA: No, they... as far as where we were going to live and which fields we were going to work on, they did tell us. They also let us know if we were going to go with a contractor or one of the main bosses, because there were different ways in which people were selected, either by the bosses themselves or by contractors sent by their bosses. They would just say, "Your going with this boss" or "Your going with this contractor" and "This is where you're going to go to do this so-and-so job."

AJ: And what method of transportation did they use to get you from Mexico to the U.S?

NA: They brought us over by train, from where sign-ups were held. I took the train from La Piedad...

AJ: Did you have to pay for your own way or did they pay for you?

NA: They paid.

AJ: Okay.

NA: They paid my way from La Piedad to Mexicali, Baja California, and then from there we took a bus to El Centro, where all our paperwork was done.

AJ: Were the buses and trains packed full of people?

NA: Yes, there were a lot of people because a lot of people were picked to go and work.

AJ: Did the busses and trains have seats? Because I have seen pictures in which there weren't any seats.

NA: Yes. They did have seats, nothing special, but...

JA: At least it was something.

NA: Exactly, couldn't complain.

JA: So when you arrived in El Centro, that's when you had more physical exams done?

NA: Yes, that's where they did more physical exams

JA: What exactly did those exams consist of?

NA: They would take blood samples and give us a quick check up. Then, they would spray us as we as we got to the front of the line and oh did they give us a good spraying all right! (Laughing)

AJ: With some kind of powder?

NA: Yeah, with some type of powder.

AJ: Did they tell you that they were going to spray you or did they just do it?

NA: “Get in that room and take off you clothes” is what they would tell us. Then they would spray our clothes on one side of the room and spray us on another side of the room [...].

AJ: Did you have the option to choose where you wanted to work?

NA: No, we didn't have an option. “Your going here,” they would tell us. Sometimes one would say, “Can I go here because...” “No you're going where I tell you to go.” One of the guys that were in charge was kind of harsh on the people; I think it was because he was annoyed with the amount of people he was in charge of.

AJ: Was he American?

NA: Yea, they would call him, “el cepillo.”

AJ: El cepillo?

NA: El cepillo.

AJ: Did he speak Spanish?

NA: Yea. He was...

AJ: Was he Mexican?

NA: He was Mexican, well Mexican-American, or “pocho” as they say because he spoke really good Spanish. “El cepillo!” “El cepillo!” people would shout. Unfortunately he would be harsh on us, but we had no choice, we needed the money.

AJ: I can imagine so. What did you think of the first place you worked at?

NA: The first time in Merced, California?

AJ: Exactly, what did you think of it?

NA: Well, we thought [...] that we were going to an orchard to pick peaches and there was going to be plenty of peaches to pick. On the way to the orchard we happened to run into a group of Braceros that had just left from where we were headed and

they said, “ let me tell you my friend, if I were you I would turn back, its not worth it.” What happen to us previously had just happened to them, but we had hope that maybe...but we barely made enough money to eat.

AJ: In total, how many years did you work as a Bracero?

NA: Well let’s see, after that job in Irapuato I signed up again in Empalme, Sonora for my second time...

AJ: So you had to go back to Mexico to start the whole process over again, you couldn’t just go to another place from where you were?

NA: Yeah, I had to go back to start the process over again, they didn’t give anyone any preference over others [...]. I had to sign up again...but over there in Mexico, people would sometimes charge to put your name on the list.

AJ: Really, just to put your name on the list?

NA: “ You want your name on the list, then give me this much,” is what they would say. [...] People took advantage of others. “I’ll charge you so and so amount to get you on the list so you can work.” Since I needed to money, I would pay. I would find ways to get money, one way or the other. So then I got my second contract in Empalme and from then on I learned new ways to be able to get on the lists and get picked to cross over to work. I would just keep signing up in Empalme and things just seemed to be working out from there. For a while I was in Sonora, picking cotton so that I could get a card that they would give out to people that meant they could work as a Bracero. One would pick a certain amount of cotton in kilos, and then the boss would give you the card to be able to cross over to work. I stayed there in Empalme, crossing over many times for work.

AJ: So how many times were you selected to work as a Bracero?

NA: Well lets see, Merced was the first time, the second time I went to Tracy, Imperial Valley was the third, Yolo Valley, near Sacramento, four, Somerton, Arizona, five and Santa Paula was the sixth time...

AJ: So in total it was six times?

NA: In Santa Paula a worked for three years picking lemons

AJ: So Santa Paula was your last job as Bracero?

NA: Yes, Santa Paula was my last job working as a Bracero; the year was 1962 when I left there. Let me tell you though, in Imperial Valley... I actually mentioned this when I was interviewed over there. We were at a work camp in which the majority of people there were Filipinos. Everyday, all they would give us were

pig's feet for dinner, nothing else! Also, either Saturday or Sunday, I'm not sure which day but, they would give us sardines, but the rest of the week, it was pig's feet! That's how things went for us [...] there wasn't much we could do about it.

AJ: Did you get used to eating pigs feet?

NA: Well yeah, that's all they gave us.

AJ: So then the three years you spent in Santa Paula was your longest job?

NA: Correct, three years picking lemon.

AJ: Since you spent the most time in Santa Paula, let's talk about that job more in depth. Can you describe the daily routine you had there? What was your work schedule like? How early did you have to start working in the morning?

NA: Well, we would wake up around 5a.m. and have breakfast. We would usually have to start work between 6a.m. to 7a.m. I believe. We would all have our lunch together in the fields, and then we would go back to our work camp and have dinner later in the evening. We would go out and pick lemon, but sometimes the lemons were wet from the morning dew and we were told not to pick those because they lemon would quickly rot. There were some days that we only were able to fill one box full of lemons, and they were small boxes too, each weighing about forty-five pounds. Even if it was just one box we filled, they still made us pick the lemons, just to able to say, "Get out there and work, even its only one box full." Pretty much, the rest of the time in which we weren't working, we played horseshoes because that's all we had to pass the time...

AJ: What is horseshoes; I'm not familiar with that?

NA: Well it's a game in which one throws metal horse shoes from about here to there and tries to hook them on a metal stake. (Describing how to play horseshoes.)

AJ: Oh, now I know what you're talking about, it's where you toss those...
(Describing that she understood what horseshoes is.)

NA: Yes, exactly.

AJ: So that's what you guys would do to pass the time when there weren't much lemons to pick?

NA: Yes. There wasn't anything else we could really do, although, others also played craps. Between those two games is how we spent our free time when we didn't have any work to do. Anytime they let us work early, we would take advantage because at least... When we didn't have to work anytime after 9a.m., they would

still pay us about 30 or 35 cents an hour and of course they would take the cost of food out of what we earned and what was left over for us to keep [...] didn't really matter to the bosses. Also, as the Bracero Program was coming to an end, the bosses would ask for 200 Braceros when they only needed 100. The reason for that was because, normally the 100 people they usually needed would get paid for 8 hours, but since they asked for double the workers, they paid the first 100 people their 8 hours and the other 100 workers would get paid for about 4 or 5 hours, 6 at the most. They made money of the Braceros because, although they gave the workers about the same hours in pay, maybe a little less, they still took out the room and board fee from every ones pay, even those who didn't work, and the more people there was, meant there was more money to be made. So even though everyone didn't work the same amount of hours, we all had to pay the same for room and board.

AJ: Really, so everyone had to pay the same for room and board even if some worked less than others?

NA: Yes, they charged everyone the same.

AJ: What foods would they normally have for the workers to eat?

NA: Well first off, I would have to say that the food they gave us in Santa Paula was the best.

AJ: Really?

NA: Yes. In the morning they would make us eggs, however we like them, oatmeal or coffee and juice. They fed us well and were somewhat more caring than others. Now the time I spent in Imperial Valley, that was the hardest place to work out of all the cites I worked at, where all they fed us were pigs feet and...

AJ: Did anyone complain at all?

NA: For what, we weren't going to get anything out of it! If you didn't like it [...] too bad, there weren't any other options.

AJ: Did the housing they supplied the workers with in Santa Paula have any furniture?

NA: No. There were 8 of us in a room with one bed and a place for our clothes. That was it.

AJ: Was it as big as it is here? (Comparing the size of the room in Santa Paula with the room in which the interview is taking place.)

NA: Yeah, pretty much...it was big enough. Although there were 8 of us, it was ok. I couldn't complain about both the living situation and the food, it wasn't as bad as other places. Even the bathrooms were nice, but in Yolo it was more...

AJ: Compared to Santa Paula?

NA: Exactly, and it was known as the "new camp" because everything was brand new and well taken care of. I was happy there although sometimes there wasn't always a lot of work...but either way, I still liked it.

AJ: So I take it that when there wasn't much work to be done, you didn't make as much money?

NA: That's right, the less work there was, the less money we made. On the other hand, when there was work to be done, we would make a fair amount of money.

AJ: Would you send money to family in Mexico?

NA: Yes. Since it was my grandmother that I supported, I would send her money.

AJ: With the money you made there at the "new camp," did you have enough to pay your room and board and also to send your grandmother?

NA: I did. Like I said earlier, on days when there wasn't work to be done, we were still getting paid thirty cents an hour, so we were still able to pay our room and board. It was a policy that was put into place, to pay workers even if they didn't work that day so they could pay their room and board.

AJ: Were you able to save any of your money or did it all go to paying for all your expenses?

NA: Not really, no... sometimes I was able to save a little extra, but it was hard because we got paid so little... cheap labor is what it was. Another thing was that they were always on our case and didn't let us do our jobs well. Always saying, "Make sure the lemons don't have any sharp edges" and "Don't cut it from here" and "Don't pull on it from there," just... demanded so much. They would also tell us, "Each lemon has to be cut twice to be picked properly."

AJ: Who would tell you to do that?

NA: We would pick a lemon, cut it from one side and then make the second cut to even it out. Then the boss would come by and grab some of the lemons we had picked and rubbed them on his face to make sure they didn't have any sharp edges. We had to just find our own ways to make sure we were doing it right, but even then, the bosses would be on our case and not let us do our jobs.

AJ: Did you ever have any problems with the bosses not paying you?

NA: No. That was one thing I never had any problems with.

AJ: Come payday, did they always pay you the correct amount for your hours worked?

NA: Yes, but we got paid according to the contract. How they did it was, they would pay us based on how much we picked by looking at the orchards. They would estimate how much you picked and then pay you based on that estimate, even though the amount one picked was really higher, which was unfair. What they should of done was pick someone who was average, not someone who picked the best or someone who didn't pick that well at all and give an estimate based on what that person picked. That way it would be fair for both sides, but no, they would pick someone who had picked a lot and given a low estimate and therefore our pay would be low.

AJ: Did you ever have any problems with any the boss?

NA: No, not really. The boss and I got along pretty well. The only problem I ever had was when another Bracero would steal boxes of lemons that I had picked...
(Laughing)

AJ: He would do this while you were picking lemons?

Exactly, when we would be working... He would always want to work next to me so that he could switch out my full boxes with his that weren't as full. I started to notice because all of a sudden he started to have large amounts of boxes and we both usually picked at the same pace. So what I did was, I started to mark my boxes so that I could have proof that he stole them. Then one time, I noticed that he had ten boxes and I only had five, there was no way he could have that much more than me! I told myself. I finally had proof, so I went to the boss and told him what was going on. The guy who was stealing my boxes and I both got along pretty well with the boss, but that other guy was a brown nose so I wasn't sure what the boss was going to say. What I told the boss was, "Listen, guess what. What's his name is stealing my boxes of lemons that I picked!" "No, that cant be." "Well its true!" "And what makes you think he's stealing them?" "Let me show you." So then I took him over where the other guys had my boxes. "Look, can you see these marks, those are the same marks that I put on all my boxes. I did that on purpose because I started to notice that he was stealing them." Well, nothing happened after that, there wasn't anything that got resolved. But when we had lunch later that day, the guy who stole my boxes would usually start a fire so we could warm up our tacos for lunch everyday, said out loud, "Too bad that we got some lazy people around here who would rather say that I stole their boxes of lemons instead of actually doing some work," knowing it was me who complained to the boss. I answered back, "You are stealing my boxes!" I said and, "I could prove it to you too." Then he said, "The real reason is that you're

slow...” After that I said, “Look, there’s the boss, he’ll tell you that you had my boxes in which I had secretly marked, I’m sure you didn’t pay attention to that, huh?” After that everyone didn’t really like that guy for a while, but then as time passed he started to be really nice towards me [...].

AJ: Did he stop stealing your boxes after that?

NA: Yes, after that he stopped.

AJ: Wow. So what was the procedure for when someone got hurt or sick at work?

NA: Well, if someone got injured, they would take him to the doctor right away.

AJ: Would the boss pay or would they take it out of your pay?

NA: We had health insurance that would cover any injury or illness.

AJ: So they would take care of you if something happened?

NA: Yes, wasn’t much, but at least it was something.

AJ: Did you ever get ill or injured?

NA: No, never got seriously ill or hurt, no.

AJ: Did you ever see any Bracero that you worked with protest about the working conditions or just the type of work in general?

NA: I can’t say that I did, no. Like I mentioned earlier, in Santa Paula, we were pretty well taken care of, they didn’t really do anything cruel to us. They would feed us good food, our housing was clean, even the bathrooms weren’t bad at all. So in Santa Paula I never saw anyone ever protest about the working conditions... or that they weren’t happy with what we had. In other areas it was a different story though. On one occasion there was an argument between some of the workers with one of the bosses or with some workers who served the food. In Imperial Valley, there was an argument between a worker and one of the cooks. The cook wanted to charge the worker for a soda that he didn’t buy. The worker told the cook that, “I didn’t get a soda so why are you charging me for one?” “Don’t act dumb,” said the cook, “ I gave you that soda and [...] your not going to pay for it?” “No” said the worker. “I didn’t steal anything, nor do I need any handouts from anyone. If I want something I will pay for it myself.” They went back and forth, just saying who knows what. “Well let’s go then” and then all of a sudden they just started swinging at each other.” The fight was between a Filipino and a Mexican and the Mexican ended up throwing some kicks at the Filipino guy. “Great” said the Filipino. “I’m over here waiting for this guy to punch me but he

ends up beating me with some kicks.” In Modesto, California there was also a problem that involved food. We would always notice that they were slaughtering cows and pigs, but all we ever got was the bones from the cows and pigs to eat. (Laughing) What they would do is sell the meat. But one day, one of the Braceros told one of the cooks, “Hey, why is it that...” he and the cook already didn’t get a long too well and was in front of me in line when he said, “Why is it that we don’t get any meat, just the bones? I’m not a dog, so why would you give me bones to eat?” The cook tells him, “So you can shove them down your throat. “ “Oh really” says the worker. “Yeah” says the cook. Then all of a sudden the worker threw the bones in the cooks face causing the cook to jump over the counter and start fighting with the worker. To this day I never found out to whom the meat was being sold to. All I know is that all we ever got were the bones that had just a tiny bit of meat still on them.

AJ: And that was in Modesto right, not in Santa Paula?

NA: Right, that was in Modesto.

AJ: Did you have any days off at all in which you could do whatever you wanted and didn’t have to work? Like a Saturday or Sunday perhaps?

NA: Yes, actually we had Sundays off.

AJ: Could you go out, leave town for a while maybe?

NA: Yeah, we were free to go wherever we wanted. Especially when I used to work in Imperial Valley, we would go to Mexicali a lot since it was close by. He had fun, too much fun. We would spend all our money that we had just earned from work. (Laughing)

AJ: What would you spend your money on? What types of things were there to do?

NA: Well, there was plenty of stuff to keep us busy, especially bars; everyone always wanted to go to the bars. All the guys were single, not one of us was married at that time, so we wanted to just have fun. Anytime we were close to Mexicali, that’s where we went on our days off. When we weren’t working close to Mexicali, we still had fun; there were still bars around that we could go to.

AJ: I could imagine that everywhere you worked, there was a bar?

NA: Oh yeah.

AJ: Were there any venues that you could go to and watch movies?

NA: You mean a theater? Yeah. In those days we had movie theatres.

AJ: Were there any theatres that showed movies in Spanish?

NA: Yeah. In Santa Paula there was a theatre that showed movies in Spanish and...

AJ: Were there any catholic churches also, in Santa Paula?

NA: Yeah, but none of us really were interested in going to church; just hanging out at the bars was what we did. (Laughing) There were some who did go to church, around 5%, but the rest...

AJ: Did you ever visit your grandmother in Mexico while you worked as a Bracero?

NA: Yeah. I visited her various times. Every time a contract was up, I would go back to see my grandmother, even if it was just for a short while. I didn't have too much time off between contracts. It was hard to stay in Mexico, especially when going to work in the United States was so tempting. Even though I didn't make much coming to work in the United States, it was still something. During that time, there wasn't any money to be made in Mexico or there weren't any jobs available. Unlike now, thank God that there are more jobs available and more money to make, but because everyone stayed here in the United States, there isn't anyone to fill those jobs.

AJ: That's true. During the three years you spent in Santa Paula, did you guys celebrate Holy Week or Christmas at all?

NA: Not really. Everyone did their own thing, but nothing big like you see nowadays.

AJ: What about Mexico Independence Day; would there be any special celebrations?

NA: No not really, not in those days. There weren't too many people from Mexico where I was, just a whole mix of different Braceros.

AJ: What about you, would you celebrate any of those holidays?

NA: Yeah, a few of us would gather at the bars and have our own little parties, but only in the bars, we wouldn't take it to the streets... Since there weren't too many Mexican and Latinos in those days, but now everywhere you look, you see one.

AJ: After the three years in Santa Paula, did you stay in Santa Paula or did you go somewhere else?

NA: No, I left to Los Angeles because a lady that I had previously met was trying to encourage me to apply for my citizenship. I tried to make up a lot of excuses to

not go, telling her that I'm just going to end up getting deported, but I ended up going anyways. "Look" she said, "I'll take you to see a lawyer that has already helped my husband with his citizenship and if in the mean time you get deported, I'll keep giving the lawyer your payments while you find a way to get back into the U.S." I mean she put the whole plan on a silver platter and it sounded like a great idea. So we go to L.A. and I meet with the lawyer, I fill out the application and all the paperwork. One thing that I worried about was that my work contract was coming to an end, so I asked the lawyer what I should do and he said, "After your contract is up, no matter what just stay in the U.S." So when my contract was up I did what he said and stayed only to be deported three days later. I kept in contact with the lawyer through phone calls, until I finally went to San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora, which was close to the border, to meet with him. Around that time, a new form came that was known as the 320. It was a form that needed to be signed by the Department of Labor so that one can receive citizenship. The lawyer tells me, "That form needs to be signed by the Department of Labor, I can't just go to the Department of Labor, and they'll just say, 'Sure we'll sign it, just fill in the profession.' I guess right now isn't the best time to apply for your citizenship." So then after that happened, I was able to come back to L.A. with a temporary passport to meet with the lawyer again. I asked him, "Well since its not going to work right now, why don't you just give me all the paperwork with my information back, as well as the money that I have already given to you, since that was part of the deal." Right away he asks me, "How did you get across the border?" "Just like everyone else" I said, "I just had to rough it." Even though I crossed over legally, he didn't know that and I wanted to see if he'd call the cops on me. "Well, do you have proof that you gave me your information and your money?" "No" I said, "I gave all that to you, you should have it." "Well I don't have anything, you should have it." I really did have the info I was just checking to see his reaction. "Well look here, I do have it," I said. So he had no choice but to write me a check for what he owed me, but then says, "Look, I'll give you half of what you gave me and your case will stay open, that way if the government changes the laws about immigration, you'll be one of the first persons that I'll help with their citizenship." Well I was fed up so I just told him yes, I didn't think I was going to get any of my money back, so I was happy that I got something. After that, I just left things the way they were, not worrying about my citizenship until I got married in San Luis...

AJ: I have a question. How were you able to get a temporary passport? You said you weren't a citizen yet.

NA: Well, that passport was something they gave out at the border for people to come and go for short periods of time. They called it a temporary passport.

AJ: Ok. So it wasn't a regular one that they give to citizens?

NA: No. It wasn't like that; I couldn't use it to get a job or permanent residency. It was given out so that people could cross over to go shopping and things like that. I

was able to go to L.A. with that passport where we would buy strips of pig skin to make pork rinds in Mexico.

AJ: Before I cut you off you were about to talk about when you got married?

NA: Yeah. I was just going to say that I got married around that time.

AJ: What year did you get married?

NA: First I got married in 1965 through the court and then in 1965 a got married through the church.

AJ: What was the main reason that you stayed in the U.S. and didn't just go back to Mexico?

NA: Well, to begin, I had some relatives that lived in San Luis where I first saw my wife, which was in 1950. I went there to work with in uncle of mine that lived there... He used to be one of the bosses of a ranch, but then moved to San Luis. I always had intentions in going back to the U.S. to work. As I worked there with my uncle I met my soon to be wife in San Luis, she was very young, and as a matter of fact I was fourteen years older than her. Then finally I left to work to the U.S., coming back and leaving again for work. About ten or eleven years passed and I finally came back form the U.S. I found that my soon to be wife and her stepfather, which was my uncles father-in-law, had moved in next door. It had been a long time since I had seen her and though, "wow she's grown up," I thought to myself. Soon after that we got married and then...

AJ: At what age?

NA: Her?

AJ: No, you. How old were you when you got married?

NA: I was 32 and she was 18. (Laughing)

AJ: Where is she from?

NA: She is from San Luis, Sonora. She's as they say "*sonorense*" and I'm "*michoacano*." So yea, that's pretty much the story of how we fell in love. Some time passed and we ended up having a baby girl, then our second daughter came and then came our son. When she was pregnant with our second son, she had a passport to come to the U.S.

AJ: Was it one of those temporary ones?

NA: Yeah it was. I had a cousin that I considered a brother to me that lived in Riverside. So I called him and asked if my wife could go to Riverside with him so that my son can be born in the U.S. He said, "Of course, I'll go pick her up." So he did which was nice of him. When my wife went to get permission to leave to the U.S. they extended her time to visit to a month since they didn't notice that she was pregnant or else they wouldn't of done that. After that he became our son's godfather and told my wife, "If you don't give birth within the next month, I'm going to have to take you up to the mountains and hide you until you give birth." Well, four days after she got to Riverside, she gave birth and that's how we were able to start the application process for our citizenship.

AJ: What year did you become a citizen?

NA: It was the in the year 2000.

AJ: What about your wife?

NA: She never got her citizenship; she's just a permanent resident. She never wanted to become a citizen.

AJ: Why's that?

NA: She just never really wanted to. She would just say, "For what."

AJ: So how many children did you two have in total?

NA: Four.

AJ: So two were born in Mexico?

NA: Yeah, both our girls were born in Mexico. Our first son was born in Riverside and our other son was born here in Oxnard.

AJ: So do all four of your children live here in Oxnard?

NA: Yes, all of them... well one lives in...

AJ: Did you all come to live in the U.S. together or did you stay in Mexico and sometime after they were all a bit older?

NA: We all came together when they were all very young, as soon as they got their permanent residency, which was in 1973. I got mine in 1970, so in 1973 we all came to Oxnard. They all grew up here in Oxnard and went to school here in Oxnard as well. One of my daughters went to nursing school and now lives in the Sacramento area where she is married. She used to live in Eureka, well actually

Fortuna with her husband, but it's been about a year now that they moved to the Sacramento area, but all my other children live here in Oxnard.

AJ: And how old are your children?

NA: The oldest, she is 44. My other daughter...they're a year apart, so she is 43, my oldest son is 42 and the youngest is 22. He was born twenty years later.

AJ: Same as me, I'm 22 years old. You mentioned that he went to high school here right?

NA: Yeah, they all went to high school here.

AJ: So after all that we have talked about, your experiences as a Bracero, all that you had to endure, does the word Bracero have any special significance to you?

NA: Well, I would say that a Bracero is someone who comes to the U.S. to work, work in the fields to have money to survive, and that was what we set out to do.

AJ: How does it make you feel when you someone calls you a Bracero?

Well I would say that... Since I picked lemons and someone calls me a "lemon picker," I can't deny that, that's the truth. So to hear that, it doesn't offend me, I'm proud of what I did. I don't think that being called a Bracero is an insult, on the contrary, I'm able to say that I was a Bracero, I traveled here, I went there, I witnessed this, I endured that and that's why there weren't any problems in getting my story out. Like I was saying, I didn't learn to read until I was older because there weren't any schools around where I grew up, but I was always interested in learning how to read. So any chance I would get, I would ask, "what is this letter?" Well, "this letter is so and so." And also I would ask, "What does this word say?" Well, it says, "this and that." That's the way that I slowly taught myself how to read. Then I started to lyrically put words together which helped learn more. I wouldn't be able to tell you anything about history, since I didn't learn much about that, but ask me to read something, that I can do.

AJ: How old were you when you started to teach yourself how to read?

NA: I was about... I was definitely a little boy because I remember that I would cry when my grandparents wouldn't buy me a book called "silabario," that had the alphabet and other stuff. So I would say that I was about eight.

AJ: Wow, so really at the age of eight. ?

NA: Yeah, that's when I began to get tempted to learn.

AJ: So then when you worked as a Bracero, you already knew how to read?

NA: Yeah. I wasn't perfect but I knew the basics. I've always loved to read so I would always learn new words from the books I read. Even now, I own a lot of books at home and I'm always reading them. Sometimes I'll even ask someone a question who actually went to school, and they don't know the answer (Laughing), but me I do, and I didn't even go to school. [...] So pretty much that's how I taught myself to read and write.

AJ: I guess we do what we can to make it work. So after working with other Bracero's as well, would you say that overall your experiences were good, bad or a combination of both?

NA: I experienced it all. There were times when things were a bit rough, especially when we didn't make to much money. On the other hand when we were working a lot and making money, there was a more positive attitude amongst us all, which made living with each other easier. I got to meet a lot of people from different parts of the country and made new friends as well, who became true friends that we considered family. There were times though, that we also met people that we didn't get along with which is bound to always happen. One thing though, I never questioned my self, "what did I get myself into?"

AJ: Do you think that if you never would of done the Bracero Program you would of stayed in México or did the Bracero Program change your life?

NA: In San Luis, Mexico, I had a good job. I was never known to give up, well maybe now since I am a bit older, but I was never satisfied, I always wanted more out of my life in San Luis. After the Bracero Program I worked making pork rinds for ten years then I worked at a high school making good money, which was hard to come by. I had one month per year of paid vacation time, access to loans that were issued by the government to federal employees, (since I was one) and free health insurance, it was a good job. Even then, I still wanted more. So that's why I decided to get my citizenship so I could come to the U.S. and work. Once I got that all situated it felt good because my life got even better, I started making more money and I was able to buy things that I never would have been able to buy if I would of stayed in Mexico. Sometimes when I go back to San Luis, I drive my car there, it's a pretty nice car too and people are always saying, "How can you afford it, you must be selling drugs!" At least that's what I told a border patrol officer once, jokingly. My first brand new car was a Dodge van and one time when I drove to Mexico, I was pulled over by a border patrol officer and he said, "Wow, nice car. You must have a lot of money." "Yes" I told him, "I got it from being in the drug business." "Oh" he says, "Are you a drug smuggler?" "No" I told him, "I'm just high off life." It's definitely different here then it is in Mexico, its not the same making 500 pesos over there, than making \$40 or \$50 a day here in the U.S. The money goes a long way here and not too many people are making good money in Mexico, except maybe building contractors. But as I mentioned

before, I always looked for ways to get ahead. Now of course I'm not making money like I used to, but I was able to make enough to live comfortably.

AJ: Now that you have experienced the Bracero Program, if you could go back would you do anything different?

NA: Well you don't see Braceros anymore... When Cárdenas was president of Mexico, before he died, the U.S. was looking to start the Bracero Program again, but Cárdenas told the U.S. that this time around, he wanted the Braceros to receive the same pay and benefits that U.S. workers are receiving. The U.S. didn't agree so it didn't happen again. Thank God that nowadays we have what we need to survive and not have to depend on other people because it wasn't always that way. Now we can put food on our tables and back then we couldn't, times were tough. The U.S. isn't going to ever do the Bracero Program again, but if so, something that I would hope to see different is that they give them good pay and benefits and not exploit them by asking for more Braceros than they really need just to make money off them for the room and board like they did in the past.

AJ: Would you do it all over again?

NA: No, I'm too old now. (Laughing)

AJ: Of course not now, (laughing) what I meant was, if you could go back would you do it all over again, knowing how tough it was?

NA: I think so, yeah. It was tough but it wasn't impossible. Of course I suffered but I had no choice, I had to keep pushing on.

AJ: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

NA: No, I think I let it all out. (Laughing)