

Washington County Museum
Oral History Interview with Jose Jaime
At Hillsboro Civic Center
October 3, 2012

Informant: Jose Jaime

Interviewers: Beth Dehn

Transcriber: Jeff Millen

JJ = Jose Jaime

BD = Beth Dehn

BD: This is Beth Dehn for the Washington County Museum interviewing Jose Jaime on Wednesday, October 3rd, 2012. The interview is taking place at the Hillsboro Civic Center, and this is a follow-up interview from an interview that was taken by Michael O'Rourke[?] for the museum on February 11th, 2001. Today's interview is mainly going to be regarding the Bracero Program and Mr. Jaime's thoughts on how that has affected Washington County.

So, Jose, can you tell us -- your family. You had brothers who were *braceros*. Can you tell us a little bit about from what they shared with you?

JJ: Sure. My name is Jose Jaime, and I am a resident of Washington County since 1986, although coming on and off since 1965. My experience with the Bracero Program has been a direct experience because three of my brothers were *braceros*. My brother, Tito, the oldest of ten brothers and sisters, came way back in late 40s and 50s and worked in mostly in lemon orchards, avocado orchards, and vegetable orchards. And finally he decided to settle down because he was a good worker and his boss gave him . . . the proper letters to become a permanent resident. He was very illiterate. He probably went to school maybe three or four years of elementary school. So, my surprise with him was the fact that because of his hard work and mostly because of his dedication to his employer, he was able in spite of his lack of education to make life work better for himself here in the States. And of course one of the advantages of the *braceros* was the fact that since they were working and they always think family, they would be sending money to the family. I still remember my parents receiving checks from my brother, Tito, and we were always happy to receive those checks because it was gravy on the table—a little extra income that otherwise was hard to find in the agricultural life of my family.

My second brother, he was the fourth brother, he came and spent quite a bit of time in Empalme, Mexico, where people were treated basically like animals even to the point of being fumigated to make sure that they didn't come with diseases to the States. It brings me tears because he was sent to California—not to California—to Arizona, and it was probably—Arizona was probably the worst state to go to work for the migrant *braceros*. And I was so surprised watching a movie recently about *braceros* how much and how hard they worked in Arizona to make very little money. Actually, they would make maybe seventy, eighty, or ninety dollars, but the final paycheck would be a dollar seventy or two dollars or three. This brings me a lot of sadness because at that time that my brother was a

bracero in Arizona, I was a student in New Mexico. And because I had seen and known that my brother, my oldest brother in California, would be sending money to my parents every now and then, and my second brother was in Arizona, I thought, “Well, he’s making dollars,” and I don’t have any money here in the college where I was studying. Maybe I should ask him for money because I wanted to buy a typewriter—one of those Hermes. I still remember the brand name—a Hermes typewriter. So, I sent him a letter and told him that I needed to buy a typewriter, and it was from ninety dollars they were selling it to me for forty. So, it took him a while to collect the forty dollars. He finally sent them to me, and I bought the typewriter. But, after I watched that movie, I appreciate much, much more the fact that he sent me forty dollars at that time for me to buy that typewriter which is still in the family.

My youngest brother got to Empalme and was not recruited. He went through the whole process of decontamination or desanitation or whatever it was just like cattle and was never herded up to become a *bracero* in the States. So, he stayed there for a couple of months, and I don’t know how much suffering he went through, but I am pretty sure that not having any money, there was a lot of suffering for him, and finally he was able to make enough money to come back home.

So, my experience with the Bracero Program in the family is a very sad experience, quite often moving me to tears especially after watching that movie.

BD: Did you talk to your brothers during the time they were working, or did they communicate any feedback?

JJ: Unfortunately, my brothers, when they would come home, the two brothers that were *braceros* and came back home every now and then when they could, not earning that much money, they would come and for some reason or another a lot of people tended to fantasize and saying how great this place was and how much money they had made, although it was doubtful that they really made that much money. And, it was a common story among people that came up here to work as *braceros* and came back and telling people, you know, how life is so good in here and how much money and how easy it is to make the money, and they didn’t talk about the suffering. They didn’t talk about all that pain that they had to go through—at least in my family experience and in my town experience because there were a lot of people that came as *braceros*.

BD: What sentiment comes to mind when you here the word *bracero*?

JJ: I don’t know if it’s a sentiment, but now I think of the *braceros* and tears. That would be what comes to mind. Sadness. Tears. Sad history in the history of Mexico. The Bracero Program probably brought dollars to many *braceros*, but brought much more suffering. For the *braceros* that made it up here and for the many [that] wanted to be *braceros* and never made it and just came up to Empalme and to other places of recruitment, and, you know, just suffered.

BD: Now, in our research, we’ve learned that there were two *bracero* camps in Hillsboro which is now Shute Park, I guess, the old fairgrounds, between 1943 to 1947 when the program officially ended, but we don’t see a lot of—we haven’t found people maybe that stayed from that experience, but we do have an idea—or maybe it’s an hypothesis that we haven’t proven, but do you know of any connection with the Bracero Program in general across the United States and maybe a connection to Washington County?

JJ: Uh, what I in my experience of the few people that I have encountered that were *braceros*, they

don't live here in Washington County, and probably they are already dead. They lived in Portland, and they came mostly—the ones that came to Portland—they came to work in the railroad and probably in the Port of Portland, too, itself. It doesn't surprise me that *braceros* came also here to Washington County because it has been an agricultural community forever, and many people that I have encountered that have settled in this area did not come as *braceros*. They came on their own from Mexico. They knew the way to get up here, and they were attracted to Oregon because it was a seasonal type of work, and that's mostly what a lot of the people from Mexico that wanted to be workers in the States, they just wanted to be seasonal workers so that they could go back to their families and probably bring in money and have a better life for their families in Mexico.

BD: Now can you describe a little bit more about the conditions that your family—was it Morelos, Mexico that you were from? What were the conditions like for your family that necessitated or that maybe instigated your brothers to go?

JJ: I think that the main reason why my oldest brother came up here was that, uh, working as a *campesino* in my home town was not a trade that would enrich you. In fact, you had to work a lot, very hard, and just barely make ends meet. The other thing was that my brothers being so, you know, youthful, teenagers, strong, healthy, they didn't see themselves as, you know, staying there and working in the fields and just continue making ends meet and that's it. And when they saw the opportunity to come as *braceros* like everybody else, all the youth of their time, that's what they wanted to be because they thought, you know, you can come and just pick up dollars from the trees in Oregon or California or Arizona or on the East Coast.

BD: What, uh—this seems like a strange question—but what is a *bracero*?

JJ: It all depends on how you break up the word, *bracero*, but, uh, if you refer to the *braceros* the meaning of the word was that, uh, *brazo* is your arm, so a *bracero* is the person that works with his arms—with his *brazos*. However, if you put *bracero* into a context it's a place where you make fire and where you cook from *brasas*.

BD: *Brasas*. I never thought about that.

JJ: So, a *bracero* is the place where you put the coal, light it, and then you put a *comal* —the pan—and cook the tortillas there. So, those are the two meanings. I think when they thought of calling it the Bracero Program, it referred more to the *brazos*, to the arms, to the use of your being a handyman especially in the fields.

BD: Now, you have seen great changes in Washington County because you've been coming here starting back in the sixties—mid-sixties?

JJ: Yeah, sixty-, I actually came back the first time to Washington County in '65 and '66.

BD: And back and forth, and then you became a permanent resident in '86, you said?

JJ: '86, uh-huh.

BD: So, you've been here for a long time. Bracero Program was a short—I mean—determined by the Bracero Program was short lived in Oregon, so '42 to '47, but we see migrant labor—I don't know if it's

connected. I don't know how to ask this question, I guess, but I how has the county changed with-

JJ: Uh-huh. Well, is the migrant influx in Oregon, particularly Washington County, connected with the Bracero Program? It is, but it's a very thin line of connection. The connection was that there were some *braceros* that came here and probably the voice got around and they thought Oregon is a good place to come to work because it's agricultural, and most of the people that came as *braceros* came to work in the fields, or in the railroad, but mostly in the fields. However, the word got around and the need has been that in Oregon there was a need for a lot of agricultural workers. So, in my experience in the '60s was there were people here dedicated to go down to Mexico and recruit individuals and families to come up here and work seasonally in the crops—mostly, uh, all kinds of berries, corn, potatoes in this area. Later on, more families, especially from Texas, started to migrate to Oregon. So, we had the single, mostly single men coming from Mexico and mostly families coming from Texas and other states near the border of Texas. In fact, back in the early '70s when [] was founded, they had a program called ormetex—“or” for Oregon, “me” for Mexicans, “tex” for Texans—or me tex. And they would do a lot of piece work mostly for, not Intel but there's another big company that-

BD: Tektronix?

JJ: Tektronix. And they would be trained there, and then Tektronix would hire them. So, that's, that's . . . Later on, another problem was developed that, uh, formed a group of churches that decided to subsidize twelve families to settle down because we thought that in order to get rid of poverty people needed to stop being migrants and settle. So, that group helped twelve families for six months with, uh, room and board and work, and they didn't have to pay anything so that they could buy their home and that's how they stayed. And those families were actually the founders of [] later on.

BD: So, was that the Catholic Church that did that, or was . . . ?

JJ: No, several churches. Several churches here in Hillsboro. It was really a nice program. Good program.

BD: That's great. I heard you talk about that on Saturday.

JJ: Yeah. So, there is a connection, but very, very thin.

BD: Here's my last sort of . . . maybe it's more of a theoretical question. Obviously, there are many perspectives to the Bracero Program which you were saying. On one hand we hear people saying, “Well, you know, laborers came and harvested all the crops, I mean they fed the United States and most of Europe, you know, during World War II,” and then we see the labor issues that were, you know, . . . and camp conditions that were not up to par. So, I don't know, theoretically, is this . . . how do we preserve this history? How do we get all those perspectives at this point?

JJ: I think doing this what you're doing with me, doing it with many other, uh, especially elderly Hispanics that have settled in this area. They could tell their story. Some of their stories are very fascinating. That would be one way of preserving the history. And you have to remember that the Bracero Program was not only a need of the United States to have cheap labor in agriculture and working for the trains, but it was a political time bomb. I mean there were abuses from both sides, from both countries. From the States there were clear abuses of treating them like animals or worse and not taking care of really all the promises that they made when they were being recruited that they

would have decent housing which never was, that they would have food . . . room and board which at best, if it was not lacking it was not the best, it was probably the worst. So, politically it was a time bomb, and it affected a lot of the labor force here in the States, because a lot of the people that would be hiring those *braceros* would be doing it, not because they needed which they did . . . the workers, but to pay less because if they would have hired people here they would have had to pay more because people here would know how to fight for their rights. Another political angle to this is the fact that, uh, most of the times, especially the farm owners, they would look for cheap labor to make more money, and they would commit all kinds of abuses, and I was involved in many . . . you know, I was aware of many of those abuses when I was working in the '60s and then back in the '70s. But, like the legal system didn't do anything about it. I was going to say they didn't do much, but I don't think they did anything to solve those problems. People would complain and everything, but it never got anywhere. I don't know if the farm owners were really of big influence in the political system or what, but a lot of suffering went on. Now, I think—and I'm going back to the times when Cesar Chavez was the leader of the union organizers . . . organizer of the farm workers—I think people need to realize that the need of farm labor in which Mexicans appear to excel is the type of work that Anglos don't want to do here. And, when people says that we are taking the labor of the Anglos, it's such a lie to say the least. That's one thing. And the other, even the people that are of Hispanic decent, they don't want to do that kind of work anymore. And, uh, . . . so the political system hopefully is looking at that, and hopefully we don't continue depending on programs like the *Braceros* to continue with our injustices.

BD: I think my greatest fear in all of this is that we are continuing this rhetoric that we're only preserving agricultural history of this really rich, you know, Hispanic Latino community that exists in Washington County, which is not our intention, but we're also thinking well, this is an important piece of history to research, so that we can continue to build upon it. But again that . . . you never know if you're reinforcing those things or . . .

JJ: Of course. Yeah.

BD: Is there anything else that you would like to share about *braceros* or about people you think maybe we should speak with or . . .

JJ: As I said, I don't know if you can find many *braceros* anymore, but you can find a lot of migrant families that have been here for a long time, and I think we need to focus ourselves in picking up their history. That's number one. Number two, I think we should be doing a lot of research and to de-mythesize the fact that our people here, especially those who are not with the proper documentation are eating away our resources of food stamps and Medicare and health plans and everything because they don't qualify. It's a myth that they are getting our resources. Those that qualify it's because they have already paid their dues. But the majority pay their dues without qualifying. So, it's us that qualify, including all the Anglo community, that benefits because they all pay taxes. So, I don't know . . . if people that are mentally closed to the fact that we are draining the coffers of Medicare and Medicaid and, you know, Social Security, they are never going to accept the fact that, you know, that . . . they pay taxes, but they don't get any benefits.

BD: Receive the benefits. Yeah.

JJ: What we need to emphasize now is the fact that the Hispanic community, including the migrant community, are enriching this county in more ways than one. Look at all the flourishing Hispanic businesses in Hillsboro that have grown—wow—more than a hundred fold. If you compare—and I

like to quote this, but, uh, it can give you an illustration—if you compare the value of the Hispanic community in the United States and consider the Hispanic community as a nation, our economic power would be considered equal to being the seventeenth or eighteenth nation in the world. So, that's the perspective that I have about the Hispanic community. And we are growing in every aspect. And we are a very young community. Yeah, all over the States, but particularly here in Oregon and here in Washington County. The majority of our Hispanic community is under twenty-four years old.

BD: In the United States.

JJ: No, here in Washington County.

BD: Hundred and twenty-four years old.

JJ: No, under twenty-four years.

BD: Ok.

JJ: Average.

BD: Average.

JJ: Not hundred and twenty-four. Twenty-four.

BD: Twenty-four. I was like that doesn't . . . ok, twenty-four years. Average.

JJ: Uh-huh. So we are a very young, very young community, and we are here to stay.

BD: Good. Well, I think the museum is, you know, to be more inclusive in what we're collecting and documenting in the county. I mean, this is what's happening right now. We're starting . . . we're looking at *braceros*, but how do we really get a better picture of the vibrancy of the community.

JJ: Unfortunately, the history of the *braceros* is already going too fast into being relegated to the past. So, maybe this would be the proper time to look for more individuals maybe that were directly involved. My involvement was directly in the sense that I had three brothers—two that became *braceros* and one wannabe. But I, myself, was not a *bracero*. I came as a student. I came as one of the elite guys that came up here with proper documentation and to study. But they came to work and work really hard.

BD: Well, thank you very much.

JJ: You bet. It's a pleasure.

BD: I appreciate it.

Terms:

Agricultural laborers—History
Braceros Program

