

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Erica Bertero

Principal Interviewee: Erica Bertero

Interviewer: Mark Robbins

Corpus Christi, TX, May 21, 2013.

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MR: This is Erica Bertero, I can't remember the date today.

EB: Let's see. The 21st

MR: The 21st of May, 2013, we'll continue, you, you were telling me about your background.

EB: So the, the, what I was talking about was the language issue in the Mexican American literature class. Which, they would ask me about mine, you know, one of the things they would panic a little bit about in the class was did they need to be able to read and speak in fluently in Spanish, and I would let them know on the very first day that they didn't, you know, that they could get a translator, a dictionary, what have you. Because now they can get free apps on their phones, which is, you know, I'm getting used to that too. And, but so it was, it was more my first language. We lived up in north Texas and so when I started Kindergarten at the age of five I have very clear memories of getting in trouble at the public school for speaking that way, and, and they would, they would send notes home and speak to my parents who spoke both very fluently, English and Spanish. Um, and said, “you need to stop, you need to stop this, she can't do this in this school, or she won't be allowed and so, and so I lost it. I understand it very well, I can read it pretty, you know, I'm average at reading, speaking takes me the longest. But, I know, you know, I've seen proof of the dual language in my childhood by looking at old home videos, things like that and just, just switching between the two languages until, you know, it was phased out. And so, they purposefully stopped speaking Spanish to me and then my brother was born when I was age 5, I mean he, he hasn't even, he doesn't have the grasp that I do on the language because by then it was... Spanish became their language. And that is how that is how it remained until I moved away from home. Spanish was their language, it was their language they spoke when they became angry, you know, became very emotional, but I always understood what they were saying. So I would just translate for my siblings and tell them, you know, you're really in trouble or something like that. There's, you know, every once in a while I have to, I have to, you know, translate it for myself or, and, you know, I was, I was, I've always been very honest and open about, about that with my Mexican American literature students. They're certainly plenty of them that were way more fluent than I was, so I would turn to them, you

know, we would be looking at a passage in the text and I would turn to them, or just ask the entire class to just translate this really quickly. And if no one could, they all took out their phones and typed it in and found the translation.

MR: Wow. At, at what point did you start to notice the school system punishing students for speaking Spanish? Was that?

EB: In kindergarten. So for me that was (long pause) 1984.

MR: Okay.

EB: And that was, the, the suburb was called McKinney. Which is, is near that Fort Worth, Dallas area. And that, at that time corporal punishment was...they didn't have to ask permission. And so I have a clear memory of that also which is why I remember my Kindergarten teacher's name, which most people don't remember that unless it was really great or really bad. For me it was really bad, because she was older, she was an older white woman and, you really, there was no, you know, I noticed this now, there was no build up to the punishment, it was no one, two three strikes, it was just automatic. And so I, and they used wooden paddles then. I would get paddled because I would accidently say something in Spanish to someone next to me. I think my cousin was the only other, Mexican American in that class.

MR: Oh

EB: Just her and I, because her mother and father had moved to that area as well, so we were in the same kindergarten class. I mean the area was predominately white at that time, as far as I can remember. That who I saw in my kindergarten class, so that is a subject that comes up in our literature class so, umm.

MR: Sure and just to have a two people that would be punished for that in class, that must have been a memorable, in not such a good way, experience in kindergarten. Wow. So at that point were you going to school year round?

EB: Yes.

MR: Were your parents, were they working in what areas, or were they working in the fields at that point?

EB: No, they weren't, they were, just had regular jobs. My mom and dad were still married. When they divorced is when my mom moved us down here to this area because all of her family were from this area. And then we she met my step father, I was then in the third grade, so the very first time that we traveled to Minnesota was the summer after my third grade year.

MR: So what areas, part down here, did you all live in? Was it in Corpus Christi, or?

EB: Mathis, which I think is considered San Patricio County, right?

MR: Yeah, I think so.

EB: I think.

MR: Yeah.

EB: So, Mathis, and then my grandmother lived in San Patricio, you know, that itty bity little town. But, yeah, I was from, from the end of first grade until I graduated from high school, that's when we lived.

MR: And you said you went up to Minnesota for the first time in third grade?

EB: uh huh.

MR: What were your experiences like there?

EB: That, the first summer seemed exciting, you know, I didn't. My step dad had gone by himself, my mom had never, I guess that probably was very new for her, so she, I know she didn't want to go at first, or I don't know what the conversations were. But then she decided to join him, so I know it was a little into June and we rode a bus. We took a bus up there and so it was me and my brother and my sister, there were three of us at the time, and um, I have a very clear memory of the very first day I ever set foot on that ranch we called, we called it "the Ranch," because that would be my summer home for the next eight years. So there was, there was a house, and that was where that my grandmother and grandfather, my step grandparents. That was their house, and then there were four to five other trailers on the same land, you know, surrounded by fields of whatever...every year the crops were rotated. Corn, or sugar beet, or beans, it was different every year. So as a kid I was excited, and I had been told that we would get to go to summer school up there which was for me, that was great, because I loved to school. And um, I was told that, you know, that at the school they fed everybody, and there was a library and that there was an indoor swimming pool and these were all things that we didn't really have as kids. We certainly didn't have an indoor pool at our school or anything like that. So, and so for those first, you know, I guess after the third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, maybe even into the sixth grade, in those summers it was fun, and, um, we did, I mean my parents signed us up for their migrant summer school every year, and so every summer, and so the bus would pick us up at 7 something in the morning and didn't drop us off until 5 something in the evening. And so we ate breakfast at school, we ate dinner; they called it dinner I remember that, I thought that was so different that it was called dinner and not lunch. And then we had supper and we had all that and then we would be taken home. And by that time, you know, the adults had come home and showered and, and my mom would ask us if we, wanted, you know, we wanted to eat again with our dad, and so, you know, we did or we didn't, whatever we did. The school took from newborn all the way through, um, as long as you weren't in high school you were eligible to go during the day. Once you went into high school, you could go to their night program, because they assumed that you would be working in the fields with your parents, which is how it was. And, in fact, thinking back on it, I can like go over those memories again and realize how many kid, children were put to work way before they were at a high school age. And so as you got older, your classrooms got smaller, especially for the males. So, I remember getting a little bit

older and the classroom would be mostly females, because, you know, the males of the family would go to work.

MR: Wow. And did anybody ever work at that age after school? Was there any picking to do after that?

EB: I know for our family, no, I mean once we came home I, like I said we didn't get home until five or six from this school program. Everyone was already back, if there was anything for you to do it might be house work or lawn work, um, things like that.

MR: What were, did your parents tell you much about what it was like, or your stepfather or your mother, during the day...? Did you get a sense of their experiences during that time?

EB: (Silence) We knew what they were doing, but, and we, we might have had when we were younger, say if we got there at the end of May, and maybe it would be a week or two before the summer school program would start, and so, um...but it, it let's see, I was nine, ten, eleven, and I was the oldest, so my parents had me to watch over the rest of them. And actually the, the women that lived, they would, they would, they organized themselves and they would take turns. One woman would decide to stay behind, and so even if I was in our own small trailer with my siblings, I knew that my aunt was over there with her children and if, you know, when it was time for lunch. We would walk right over there to their house. We would eat lunch, and so they would take turns so that, you know, that nobody was missing too many hours because they were, uh, mostly they were paid hourly.

MR: Okay.

EB: And so that was how they solved that, you know, the small amount of time before the program and maybe a little bit of time after the program. But I know I, I do remember my parents talking about maybe after I had stopped going with them, or what have you. Maybe, maybe it just got harder or the women didn't want to work with each other anymore. But, I know sometimes my parents would have to take my siblings and, and they would just be out there all day with them. Whether they chose to walk with them or hang out around the trucks that had campers and things. And my mom would keep them with busy with books and playing cards, I mean, because back then there was no phones, no hand held, there was nothing, there was no electronics. And so I remember coloring books and crossword puzzles and books and lots of, you know, crayons and markers and, you know, anything to keep us busy if that happened, if that happened for some reason. And, you know, the, the, the, the, the men who were the boss's family, he had a lot of sons. At least our, our particular boss had four sons that came, but they were such a nice family, so I know our experience was a lot better than surrounding neighbors, ranches or collection of houses or what have you, who had... you know, very, um, did not want them to use their electricity, or their water, or their heaters, you know, because sometimes we would arrive there in May and it would still be cold. But I, I remember hearing my uncles and my grandfather, and my father talking about the man that they worked for, and saying that he was truly a good person, and he was a good person. But they didn't want to see, they didn't want to see children out there, not because they were trying to make it hard for them. They just didn't want children to have to do that.

MR: Yeah.

EB: But, I would have to say that for ninety percent of the time all of the children were always taken care of by the women and that program, and as a little kid I don't really remember them saying...you know....um.....that it was hard, that they were tired or what have you. I really found that out later, you know, as, as I got older, or as I talked to them about it, you know, even now. Like I am astonished at what my mother went through, because we were oblivious as children as to what she did.

MR: Does she have any particular recollections... of moments that struck you as most interesting, that, that you would like to share.

EB: Well, I think that the amount of work. Because, you know, it was very black white, men did this, women did this, and it was, you know. There was no sharing of, I mean if it was man's work it was man's work, and women's work was women's work, and so I think what strikes me the most is that she woke up every morning at probably five something to, to cook a breakfast and to prepare lunch, whether that involved a hot lunch or a cold lunch, so she had to prepare breakfast for everyone. My dad, you know, he eats cereal every now and then, but mostly wanted a hot breakfast every morning, so she did that every morning. And luckily she didn't have to fix...if it was school time, she didn't have to fix our meals, she just woke us up, got us dressed, do your bathroom stuff, go get on the bus, and what a saving grace that must have been for her, but she still had to cook breakfast, at which they would either have at home or take with them to eat out there. But then also have a lunch ready and then walk I don't know how many miles per day, because they didn't pick anything, they used the, what do you call them, the hoe?

MR: Yeah.

EB: They used the hoe to clear the, the different types of weeds, that's what they did. So they walked up and down all day looking for the, you know, weeds around the beans, or sugar beets, and that's what they cleared out. And, um, so she would do that all day long and then come home and cook huge dinner. I mean you think about families now all their options, not necessarily healthy options, but, you know, my kids will tell me that their friends, they eat out so much, you know. Every day after school it's McDonalds or Whataburger or a sit down dinner at Fridays or whatever, so it's a lot of eating out, you know. And I remember running into a family at HEB and my cart was full of, you know, fruits and vegetables, and the things I had chosen for dinner, and my friend stopped and she had two children, and they were looking at my cart like, "wow, that's a lot of food," and she, you know, got kind of embarrassed and said, "they don't eat out as much as we do." You know, and it was true, we very rarely eat out, and so anyway I think of that, because my mom cooked dinner every night, and it was maybe once or twice a month that, especially on a Friday maybe, Friday or a Saturday evening probably, mostly a Saturday evening, because they really tried to take Sundays off, or they work half a day on Sunday, so they could go to church in the evening. We would have, so once or twice a month, maybe on a Saturday, we would all get in the car and drive to one of the nearby towns, or what have you, and have like Pizza Hut, or, but nothing like you see today. I mean it was such a rare thing to happen, and so she cooked the morning meal, she prepared all the lunch stuff, and she cooked the

dinners. And then, you know, had us go through our evening routine, take showers, all of that, so by the time she got to go to bed, you know, my dad would eat his dinner and maybe watch a little something on TV, and he would go to sleep. He was always the last one awake. I remember that distinctly too. We would get ready and we would be sitting in the living room ready for school, and he was still asleep, and she was in the kitchen. She was always in the kitchen, and we would get on the bus, and he only needed ten minutes to get ready, so, meanwhile, she had been up for three hours or two hours.

MR: And, you said you had grandparents that lived there too. Did they also do work in the fields? Did they do that rear round? Just during the Harvest season?

EB: No, just the summers. I think, I know that when they were younger and they had 10 children, and when they were younger, I know they spent some time in Michigan. My step dad would tell me that. They picked apples, cherries. They did do a little bit of the crop following, but... When my mom married my step dad and became part of that family, my only experience had been going from May to about August. And, like I said, my grandfather had a job the rest of the right months of the year, nine months of the year, or whatever. He worked for this truck driving company and how that came to be I don't know, but my grandmother, she had been a stay at home mom her whole life and I don't think ever held a job outside of the migrant work they did, you know, most of their lives. And so um, and so I, you know, we never went to any other state besides Minnesota to do that kind of work and I know when I left, uh, home. But by the time I went to college my parents had already stopped, but my parents were still going, they were well into their (pause) sixties? And, you know, every year the family, I would ask them "You have to stop at some time, you're getting too old." You know so, um, when the last summer was, I don't know, but it had to have been within the last, within the last ten years maybe.

Mark Robbins: Wow.

EB: For sure within the last 10 to 15 years.

M R: Wow.

EB: So now they're truly, truly retired.

M R: Are they still living in the same place?

EB: In Mathis, Yes.

M R: Oh, ok, so they lived in Mathis too and they would also go up there for the same amount of time.

EB: uh huh.

M R: Ok, huh. And they... did you ever hear of folks ever getting injured on the job or anything like that with....how did that work out if something like that happened? Did they stay at home during that time or...

EB: You know what, in all those years, of all those men and women that were working in the fields, and I do remember... um, you know, my grandfather teaching the youngest of his family how to drive a particular tractor. Um, because most of the work was done on foot and by hand. But I do remember sometimes someone had to drive in those, I mean humongous John Deere tractors, for what, I don't know, I never asked. But we did know as kids that that was a luxury because they were sitting up there in the air conditioning.

MR: (slight chuckle).

EB: And they would have a little radio or whatever. Um, and as far as I know there were, there were never any serious injuries which...

MR: Wow

EB: you know, that's pretty lucky

MR: Yeah

EB: For as many years I had been, there had been no injuries. Now, there were injuries with the children, though. I think the one that stands out the most is that....the man that we worked for, he was very nice and I remember the first 1,2,3 years there was, there were no running toilets in any of the houses, but there was running water, showers, whatever. Um, so there was an outhouse and that was kinda strange to me that, that, that, you know, that the entire community had to share and that there were two sides to it, you know. And I remember asking my mom "Why do we have to go outside?" you know, why don't, you know. But, he eventually built, on that ranch he built, it was made out of cement, it was made out of cement, it was made out of, you know, cement bricks and it was a men's and women's toilet with, like, he had paid for to have the system installed, you know, the plumbing, everything...

MR: Yeah

EB: So I guess, you know, if there were 5-7 homes on that piece of land, none of them were set up for plumbing, other than I guess for running water.

MR: OK

EB: No, you know... So anyway he had that built and part of that was also a couple of showers outside, but with privacy, what have you, and a washroom. Um, and the washers we used were the kind where you like, you know, it had the big steel tub and it washed it, but it didn't have the um,...what do you call it?...it wasn't a regular washer, it was old...

MR: Yeah

EB: very old, and to get the water on the clothes you had to put it through the rollers. You know what I'm talking about?

M R: Yeah

EB: You had to take it out of the soapy water, send it into one bin that would squeeze all the soap out, I guess, and from that bin you had to squeeze out one more time and I guess that was like your rinse cycle...

MR: Yeah

EB: Or what have you. And one of my cousin put his arm through that

M R: Ooh!

EB: He was out there with his mom and he was feeding those, you know, one of those rollers and one of his arms went all the way up to his....and, you know. He's screaming, and I remember. I wasn't in there, but we could hear the screaming...

M R: Yeah

EB: So all the men ran out there and the only way to get his arm out was to send it in reverse and get his arm back through. And he had to go to the hospital.... and um....It's funny, funny that I can't remember if he broke anything

MR: Yeah

EB: I don't remember if he was in a cast. I just remember the incident itself

MR: Yeah

EB: And you know, just that was the worst injury that I can remember.

MR: Sounds painful. Uh, did you, I mean you might not have known this as kid, um, do you know about how much the workers generally got paid? Were there moments of raises during that eight year period, uh, or compared to the other farms nearby with the....

EB: Right.

MR:.... less friendly owners. Was it better pay? um...

EB: I know it was better pay. I know that all the families helped each other. Say...say, say someone got sick, you know, not injured, but sick. One of the...even the men got sick every once in a while. I mean the person who was in charge of everyone was my grandfather, who was a good man also. And if someone got sick, um, he would have to sit out the rest of the day in a vehicle, or even had to be given a ride home because of a fever or something. He wouldn't dock a family.

MR: uh huh.

EB: He would just write down the hours as if they had been working all day. And so, um,.....but at the same time I know that he didn't try to outright cheat the owner out of, you know...honor. And the owner, he very much trusted my grandfather. My grandfather worked for him for, I don't know how many years, decades, he worked for him for decades. And so you always heard of other families talking about how the owners would constantly show up at whatever field they were working in, check up, and count the number of workers, try to match it to their books, and he didn't do things like that. Um, I don't...I know it was better pay.

M R: Uh huh

EB: I'm sure as the years went by, they also got raises. Um, one of my, one of my aunts, she was sort of the accountant. She, um, she was their daughter, my grandmother and grandfather, she was their daughter, and she ran the books for him, you know, and he would tell her, um,.....he would just instruct her on what the pay raise was, um, how many hours to put down for the day, or how many people, you know, that kind of thing. So he was, you know, he was well respected and it was mutual between him and the owner, whose name was Shelton Melbrook, I remember. And he was also one of the few owners that if we were under a serious tornado threat, which happened quite often, you know, it was the time of the season where that would happen up there. Many a night, in the middle of the night, we would told to wake up and get in the truck and drive a mile or two, and he would give us shelter and a lot of owners wouldn't do that. And, you know, in these communities, most of them were trailer parks, and even then I can't remember any fatalities or anything like that. I mean, I remember we could see tornados on the horizon as we were driving to find shelter. So, I mean, for many aspects of what they did, um, I think a lot of them can say that, that they were very lucky in that they had a positive experience with this family. Um, when it could've been really bad, and I know it was for a lot of families.

MR: Did, the workers who worked for this family, did they develop many relationships with those working for other families or neighboring farms and ranches?

EB: Um, ask that again.

M R: So those that worked for, like your family and the others who worked for that particular farm owner, uh, did you all, develop relationships or friendships, or any kind of ties to those who worked on neighboring farms, for other farm owners?

EB: Um, it seemed that there was, that they tried to look out for one another, you know, um,....you know, I could sort of remember hearing the men talk, my dad talking about it to my mom, what they knew of what was happening on a neighboring community wasn't right, and that maybe they could ask, you know, maybe they could ask Mr. Melbert intervene and um, try to help these people. You know I have a memory of one particular community and... um, every year was like different, different families that went, some with regularity some with not, and um sometimes they would be of distant relation to all of our family that was there. And they, as far as our community, my grandfather normally just wanted close family that would go. A couple summers they allowed, um, you know... a different Mathis family to join, maybe they weren't related to us, but my grandfather would go ahead and try them out, see if it worked, 'cause sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't. If they didn't agree with how he ran things, because he

was the person in charge both in the community and, you know, he was the one who decided if it was time to go home, say if it started raining or if the weather was going to be bad. Or if it rained overnight. He was the one, and maybe two other men would get in a truck and drive and check the conditions and come back and everyone listened. And so if you tried a family out and just didn't like them he wouldn't invite them again. They would have to go look for work somewhere else.

MR: Wow. So he was the one who... and anybody who worked on that farm dealt with your grandfather...

EB: uh huh

MR: ...so that would explain the Mathis connection. And for the neighboring farms, your grandfather didn't set up the labor for them...

EB: Right

MR:....uh...

EB: They had their own...

MR: Their own equivalent people. So, how did people get to know each other outside of these farms?

EB: Church.

MR: Church, ok

EB: They went to...you know, they would all make the drive into... there were three little towns: Hector, Bird Island and Olivia. I think the church was in Olivia, so it was about, hmm, ten to fifteen miles. Um, and there was one particular Catholic church in the area that held masses for migrant families. And so only migrant families went to that particular service. It was always Sunday evening.

MR: Huh.

EB: Because mostly, mostly they would work six days, um, sometimes six and a half days, and um, Sunday evenings were meant for the drive...um... I would say mostly church is how they.... and then they maybe also through us kids always going to the school, because I met families from Laredo, Crystal City, Mission, I mean, just all over Texas.

MR: But there were mostly Texas migrant workers going up to the...

EB: I don't remember ever meeting anyone that wasn't from Texas.

MR: Huh.

EB: It was mostly Texans, and uh, you know, on the bus we would make all the stops to all the different ranches, all the different rural communities and pick up all these kids. And uh...

M R: Oh...

EB: It's okay. We learned about a lot of where we all were from. And we learned about how many families had workers for their families, and we learned summer after summer, how many of them stopped attending school, because it was a real school, it was not a day car all day. When we got there we were tested in reading, writing, and math. And we were placed in different classes and it didn't matter your age and it didn't matter your grade, it was how you were tested, which I thought was just fantastic because I performed above grade level every summer and I was always placed in classrooms with older children and I could just keep... I didn't know the term for it then, but I know it now. Now I'm familiar with the Montessori curriculum, because my children go to Montessori school. But I didn't recognize what they were doing was catering to what we could do, or what we couldn't do. I mean, they would, they would...they had a...for all those teachers and uh, people that would work there during the summer. I don't remember ever having a bad experience with any of those teachers and reflecting on it. I think now that they were truly vested in, um, helping these children...

MR: Yeah

EB:...You know, during their summers. Um, so you know, we were tested, we were placed, and then, uh, then the language thing I remember was a point of... maybe sometimes you didn't know as much Spanish as the kids did. You would get called names if you couldn't understand or couldn't speak Spanish.

M R: That's interesting.

EB: Isn't it?

M R: Kind of the opposite of what you had...

EB: Yeah.

MR: in uh...outside of Dallas

EB: I had bad memories of that, you know, being called a coconut, brown on the outside white on the inside. Because we couldn't speak it as fluently as they could. Although, when we were there nobody was using the language, that's what would happen on the playground or in the bus.

MR: Uh, wow, that's really interesting.

EB: Uh huh.

MR: Now, you might not have known this as a kid, but do you know who hired the teachers?

EB: I don't know.

MR: Was this part of a state program? The farm owners collectively did that?

EB: I don't know. I don't know. I just, I know about the time I had gotten there it had been, you know, if that was the '90s, no late '80s. Ok, so late '80s into the '90s, that school had been in existence since at least 1970.

MR: Ok

EB: They had opened it, um, and it was a public school. All the kids were gone for the summer, it was a public school that was used, and it was in Bird Island, and that was the name of the town the school was in. Where we left was in our ranch and we would drive into Hector, you drive a little bit further and there was Olivia. But you know we spent a lot of time in Hector, we go to Bird Island for school, church was in Olivia, and the closest hospital was in Olivia as well. So anyhow, in Bird Island... I mean, it must have been state funded to provide three meals a day like that, and to provide the facilities, and we would even had field trips and the buses, those were the school buses that we used throughout the summer, we went on field trips. Um, they worked with us on our math, reading, and writing, but we also had a lot of other things. We had music, a music class, which I find fascinating now. I mean we were taught notes, we were taught notes, we were taught how to play on recorders, and on Friday we got to watch music videos, you know, different music videos. We got to go swimming which everyone looked forward to so much. Um, Fridays was like the extracurricular day. But we had a music class, we had an art class. We think about now, schools cutting back. To me that would just be... that that's the most extra anything you could give a child and...

MR: Yeah.

EB: ...and then they weren't giving it to...they weren't giving it to their own community, but maybe those kids were able to do other things; camps and what have you.

MR: Yeah...what would be interesting uh...um my understanding of a lot of this is just very anecdotal, but it seemed like when I was in school and in that same timeframe, that I never had a sense of those of programs getting cut like they are...

EB: Right.

MR:...today. Um, we had music multiple times a week in Elementary school and...you know, art multiple times a week and...so I don't know if it's that that's just, uh, I'm seeing this through uh foggy glasses or-or whether it really has changed and...

EB: It really has changed...

MR: Yeah

EB: We have seen have seen it our...we have seen that with our-our expense with our children, you know, um, what the priorities are with different schools so...

MR: Hmm...so did you ever think um...or did your family contemplate when you're--so you were there for 8 years--toward the end of that um... working in the fields yourself...um...and then going to night school during the summer time...did you ever seriously consider that?

EB: Consider what?

MR: Um staying there through high school?

EB: By the time I got to high school I despised going.

MR: OK.

EB: By the time I hit junior high I felt like...what we were doing wasn't the norm, and then it didn't, as a kid, you know, we just we looked forward to the summers. We-we-we because we knew what was coming. When my parents started talking to me about when it would be time for me to join them for me to join them, everything changed. It changed my feeling about it. My perspective. Once I reali- like truly realized what they were doing I wanted no part of it, and I know that I gave my parents a very hard time. While there were other migrant families in Mathis I didn't what to admit that we were one of them, and so I have memories of when the time I got to junior high I didn't want to tell my friends where we were going, so I would make something up... (clears throat) but I don't think that they believed me but... (clears throat) didn't matter to me either way, and then it just got worse by the time I got to high school because...(sighs) you know, I don't know when I really started thinking about college, because it wasn't discussed in my family, and I was the first of my family to go...um... I just knew that there was more than...I knew that there was more out in the world then what we were doing, and I was angry that we had to do that. Um...and the older I got the less I wanted to be leaving school, because I was, you know, missing more or missing whatever I thought I was missing, and then as I got older it's like the school year was starting earlier and earlier. It wasn't September anymore. It was August and-sometimes we weren't back by then and it would just infuriate me...and so, um, I think the summer after my freshman year I (looking for the right word) I'm going to I-I flat refused to go. I wasn't going to go, but I guess my dad could've physically just picked me up and throw me in the car and he didn't, and they decided to let me stay in Mathis with my aunt. Um...they couldn't prove to be just...boring, you know, my aunt was poor, and it was just the most boring summer. So boring that when I--when we found out that a family member was-was-was going to take the bus up there just to visit, just to visit her family for a little while. She was going to come back on the bus too. Then my mom said, "Do you want to come?" and I said "Yes, I want to go. I don't want to be here with aunt so-and-so anymore." So I took the bus with her, and that was the summer after my freshman year, and uh...it must of been my mother that...because I was just so angry and adamant and rebelling that I didn't want to go. She had...she--I'll ask her now, but she had to have been the one that said, "You know, I can't make her do this I'm going to let her stay," and-and I know my dad was really upset, because I remember getting there and he wouldn't speak to me for a while 'til he, you know, got over it...

MR: Yeah.

EB: ...and-and then I worked for the rest of the summer, but I was ok with that.

MR: So you were in, then helping with the...

EB: Yes, I was helping...um...I know I went the next summer, which was the summer after my sophomore year but by my junior year, when I completed my junior year of high school...I stayed but I got a job. I got a regular job.

MR: OK

EB: and that made my dad happy. You know, it's like well ok at least you-you know, you're old enough to have a regular job, and because, you know, that extra money helped my parents in the long run to buy myself the things that I needed clothing, and really, I mean it mostly it was all for school, you know, and um...or you know the extra things I wanted, usually books. Um...so he was--he was ok with that...um but when I stayed that particular--when I worked that summer I had to live with my biological dad and my step mother and-and...you know, that wasn't a good thing either...um...but at least, you know, I was working and I was busy and I was just saving all of my money the way my parents told me I had to. So the minute they got back I, you know, I moved in with them immediately and I, and I, um...I got a different job as a senior in high school, but I had done I had done so much work at that night school, and by the time I became a senior, I only had to go to school for half a day, because I had completed every credit there was to complete. There was nothing else they could offer me. So I went to school half a day as a senior and I worked after lunch, you know, at my part time job. Saved all my money...um...I wanna say the summer after my senior year...they didn't go. So actually, that summer that I stayed as a junior, that was their very last summer.

MR: Huh...and so you worked in the fields for your sophomore year and the summer...

EB: Sophomore year, freshman year, a couple of those, I know, my couple of years in junior high.

MR: OK so you...

EB: Even younger...

MR:... stopped doing the day school even younger than that. Ok. Um...so what were your most memorable impressions of being out there as opposed to being in school during that time?

EB: Um...I could say the positive thing about my parents was that they always let me take breaks and rest whenever I needed it. They never pushed me. My dad even, you know, never pushed me. They--it was very common for--if--for people to have Walkman's back then. The Sony Walkman with the cassette, and they always kept me in batteries. You know, and I would--and those cost money, and I knew that they cost money, but they--they would do anything that they could do to make it less than what it was. Um, so I knew they tried their hardest at that. Um,

there was always the joke that the state bird was the mosquito, and that was very true. We had to build these things that like mesh to keep them off of our skin and out of our clothes. Um, and I would say that I remember the, um...always starting in the morning because there was--you would get drenched and I was short so I would get drenched from my torso all the way down and that wasn't the best feeling, you know, and you'd have to wait until about lunch time to get completely dry but...and-and, you know, and it only got worse as the summer went and the plants grew taller and taller. Sometimes I couldn't even go help my parents, because the plants were taller than I was. So they would tell me you can't even go to this one. Um, and if-if my grandfather also said, you know, the conditions of this one are really bad...um like the growth of the weeds or the tangle of the plants, you know, he would go assess all of these things. It wasn't meant for just the children, sometimes it was meant for the women too, and so there might be particular jobs that only the men meant to because the work was very, very hard.

MR: and it was still clearing weeds uh...

EB: All weeds.

MR: Yeah.

EB: When it started at the beginning of the season, if it was a lot of sugar beets they had to space them. So, it was like if there were if there were four in a row, they had cut these two out so that these two could grow really big and flourish and what have you. So at the beginning of the season they'd be spacing, and then they'd go back to that field maybe weeks later and make sure it was cleaned but for the beans they didn't have to be spaced; they just had to be they had to be kept cleaned.

MR: What was there particular crop that you particularly liked or disliked working with?

EB: Um...not really 'cause it was, I mean, it was all the same to me. Whether it was...whether it was spacing or whether it was clearing, whatever they you know told me to look for, it seemed all the same to me and the only...I-I can't say that I ever liked it. Um...I just did it because we had, you know, I was told I had to, but my parents tried to make the best of the situation, and, um, I had a lot of long talks with my mom. Um, there were many-many times were I would pretend like I had my Walkman on but I didn't so I could listen to the women talk, which I loved because I loved to hear their stories, because they were, I mean, I'm thinking that's what they had, that's what they had to pass their time. Some, you know, sometimes my mom...would listen to hers, but... there were, you could see, I mean, it was the clear time for all the women to, you know, take their headphones off and to talk about their husbands or their children, or, you know, whatever. And I think, um, I often think about what I'm doing right now at this point in my life. I'm going to be 34 in August and my mom at my age was doing that, and I think how did she get through her day? You know, uh, if I feel tired at the end of my day, you know, I-I've been in class and I've picked up my kids, and dinner still has to be cooked. Um, every once in a while I'll remind myself to think about how, you know, how it could be, how could have been, or how maybe it is still for many, many people so...um...so even though I can say there was nothing I liked, there were moments that maybe I learned quite a bit or...um, I remember one summer being stuck on U2. I went through as much of their music as...

MR: (laughs)

EB:... I could so (laughs), and that was um... just the other day, I put on an old album by that, and that's where it took me. It took me to walking in those fields and...

MR: Wow

EB: Um...I probably was such a strange child, you know, because I wasn't just listening to the music. I wanted to know what it meant and one of the things I loved about that summer program was the library that they offered us...and, I think two times a month they did their big RIF program, Reading is Fun, and they would just give away books, and, um, we so we were allowed to pick what we wanted and-and I just spent my summers, you know, the all the time that I had: on the bus or at home, um, reading.

MR: So....were there any other recollections or perspectives that you would like to share?

EB: (pause)...um...I guess other than, you know, the-the work that took everyone there, um, I know my mom said it a few times when we were there and now that my siblings and I are all adults, and we all have our own children, and we sometimes talk about the past with our parents...that even, you know, even though, you know, whatever my parents experienced or my grandparents or what have you, um...the-the family unit was very, very strong and, you know, it-it, my grandparents especially, talk about...what they've seen maybe within the last 10 to 15 years, you know... more than that, but how they've seen like just in Mathis, you know, various families fall apart and divorces and things like that. Not to say that my own family didn't experience that, but, I mean, the man who raised me was my step father, but he was my dad, and he's who all, you know, when he married my mom, he married a woman with three children and an absent father and, um, but they're I mean they're still...still married today, and our grandparents now they, of all of that, you know, the strongest portion of it all, I guess, was, you know, the family. But it was never, uh, you know, it was never a trap either they-they did [Unintelligible] there was and, you know, my dad worked other jobs throughout the year, but, you know, it was a reliable income for them every summer, and what they earned they just put away for the rest of the year, and had to learn how to, you know, spread it out, which I don't how they did that either...but, um...and so...my sister and I just shared a joke about, uh, because my sister and I were born in August and my brothers were both born in July; two days apart, um, and my sister and I more like, you know, a week or something apart, but they always celebrated our birthdays all at once, because we were all summer babies. Two in July and Two in August... we're going to get you one huge cake, and everybody's going to name it, everyone's name is going to go on it, and yet the baby of our family always got to choose the deco. So, I remember having, you know, all four names on a ninja turtle cake that my sister and I didn't want, but because he was the baby he got to choose. Well, um, and our birthdays were always celebrated in Minnesota, and so my parents, you know, and it had to do with money... They would buy one really big cake, huge cake, to feed the entire community, but they only did it one time, so we never had these separate birthdays, you know, like my children I mean not-not until, you know, we were older. My-my daughter was born on May the 6th and she just turned 9 and my sister just had her 3rd child, like this is it, they've completed their family and, uh, she was due on May the 8th; that was her due date, and, uh, but my-my daughter Bella said, "I hope she's born on my

birthday. I want to share my birthday with her," and sure enough my sister had her daughter on my daughter's birthday, and I'd joked with her and I said "Well, I guess, we'll be getting those ninja turtle cakes for them...

MR: (Laughs)

EB:...because they can just share and she goes, "No! We're not doing that!"(laughs) but you know we have a lot of--we do have a lot of positive, fond memories because we were with each other all the time constantly. The four of us all got on the bus and, you know, when my brother, the youngest, was born he was in a baby seat, and I sat next to him and the other two sat next behind me, and then we'd all go our separate ways in the school, but you know we were always under one roof. And I very much appreciate that and really hold that close because,, like I said we knew so many people that their experience could not even come close to what we had, so we really were very lucky, very blessed to have known that family, um, his sons were just like him, his wife was really nice, um, but you know how I said on the bus we-we would get to see kids from different-different families, different cities, different communities, and you could tell the condition that they lived in. If it was a nice community, or if it was a rundown, you know, that kind of thing. So...

MR: Well, thank you, uh...

EB: You're welcome.

MR: I really appreciate it. I'll stop that here.

EB: OK.

MR: OK good.