

Interview Log

Interviewee: Soledad Perez Bernal, Sophia Chavarri, Graciela Ponte, Artemia Garcia

Tape #: OH132

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault, Helen Holland # **of Tapes:** 1 of 1

Date: 8/16/99 # **of Sides:** 2

Location: A.E. Phillips worker housing, Fishing Creek MD

Topic: crab picking, Mexican labor, travel, work in foreigncountry

Corresponding Photography Log #: yes, see Phillips Series

Comments: File name: . See fieldnotes . *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information or an aside by the fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription unless otherwise noted."

Transcribed by Helen Holland, not in exact translation. Speakers not identified by transcriptionist.

BEGIN SIDE A

- KF Will you each please give me your full name and tell me where do you come from?
- SB My name is Soledad Perez Bernal and I come from Mayari
- Mayari, is that the name of the State or of the city...
- SB It is a state, just like Maryland ... and it is in Mexico because it is not here. I am about half-an-hour from the Pacific Ocean.
- GP My name is Graciela Ponte and I come from Hidalgo.
- SC I am called Sofia Chavarri and I come from Mayari.
- AG I am Artemia Garcia, from Hidalgo.
- There are a lot of girls from Hidalgo
- Not in this house, but down the road practically all of them come from Hidalgo and San Luis Potosi.
- Where are the other girls?
- Some are bathing, others are sleeping or just resting....
- There is one lady working on papers at the kitchen table She is the lady who takes care of the accounts.... she reports to the boss.... she collects the rent and delivers it to him.
[not translated to the interviewer, not followed up by Helen Holland]
- On Mondays?
- No, on Thursdays.
- When do you get paid?
- On Wednesday but on Thursday they take us to the bank.
- KF Do you send money home every week? Are you able to save some money for yourselves?
- Not much, it depends. For instance, I did not send any money week before last so this week I have to send more so they can pay the electric bill in order not to have the service suspended. Other girls do send money every week.
- KF How much do you pay for rent?

\$25,00 per week, everything included but we asked for Cable TV which we pay extra for, and also we asked for a telephone upstairs for which we pay \$20 00 extra. Per month, each.

KF So that makes it \$27.00 each.

HH How many people live in this house?

We are 12 girls and two men actually, the men live in the other house and they only come here for their meals they are like family, one of them is the brother of one of the girls.

KF How did they learn about this job?

[They all answer at the same time.]

Through other friends.

In Mayari there is an agent who works with these plants in the past he used to hire only men to go to work in tobacco plantations in Virginia and just this past year he started asking for girls we did Not know why he was suddenly asking for girls and everybody Thought he wanted to hire girls to serve as prostitutes.

[not translated to the interviewer, never followed up on]

[Everybody laughs and giggles.]

SC? I am not a young girl so I did not think he would hire me for that....

Each of us decided to take a chance he kept talking about crabs and we did not know what he meant by that.

KF How many of you came together?

SC? More than 80.... two bus loads we stopped first in North Carolina where most of

the girls decided to stay nobody knew what to expect at the end of the line some were getting desperate, tired, frustrated, afraid ... only those who had relatives or friends here remained on the bus all the way.... there had never been a girl from Mayari working here we stayed in the Carolina the first two years later, after hearing the other girls talk about this region I came first to Salisbury... .but my boss died and I was sent here.

[part about Salisbury not translated for interviewer, not sure what plant this was]

I came to work for two years, then I stayed home to finish my studies and graduate as a Secretary, and then I came back again.

KF OK. And how does work in North Carolina compare to work here?

The only difference is that here we have to interrupt our work to go to weigh our crab meat over there we pick without interruption and Someone else weighs it for us is the only main difference.

KF And is the pay the same?

No, it is more over here for instance, here if I make 40 lbs. I get \$80.00 over there, I used to be paid \$1.75 per lb. Of lump meat and \$1.45 per lb. Of small pieces.

HH And how does the cost of living compare?

Over there we only paid \$20.00 per week but we did not have a washing machine, we had to go commercial. [washing machines]

KF And what have you told your families about your work?

We don't tell

[They all talk at the same time nothing audible]

They know that it is hard on our hands... .when we first come we do not know what to expect ... we do not know what is waiting for us.... Now, when the agent asks us to recruit for new girls he asks us to tell them the truth about how hard it is.... he says that even we should exaggerate a little otherwise when they first come they don't even know how to hold the crab and what to do with it.... It is not easy because most of us have never seen a crab before arriving here....

HH When you first arrived, did you know what to expect?

I don't remember... .but I do remember it was a shock? it is not the same to hear all sort of things about crabs than facing them for the first time..

KF How long did it take you to learn?

It did not take me too long we arrived on a Wednesday and on Thursday they took us to the plant to observe. ...not only to watch but they let us try our own way.... you learn a lot by watching others.

KF Do they tell you how many pounds to pick per day or per hour?

[....they talk among themselves]

now I think it is 21 lbs. Per day; 3lbs. Per hour minimum....I can make that easily now, but when I first Arrived I hardly made 2 lbs. Per hour....

●

How long did it take you to be able to pick 3 lbs. Per hour?

About one week.

The first day that I worked I made only 11 lbs.

●

And how many do you make now?

20, 25, 30 lbs....depending on the crab if it is not fleshy there is nothing you can do about it

It took me the whole season last year to pick up speed!

HH

And you, how many pounds do you make now?

About the same we all average between 25 and 30 lbs.

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Did all of you come together, at the same time?

No, she came first.... and then she brought me.

[A male voice is heard saying HELLO!]

Here comes our little boss, our nice little boss

[they all giggle at him...]

You are always nice to us David, and that is why we all love you...

Isn't true, David, that we all love you?

[They all make jokes at him and laugh with him.]

KF

Who was the first one to come?

I have been here 4 years with this one.

This is my second year.

KF

And will you come back next year?

God willing -

●

And you?

The same

KF When and how do you know if you are coming back?

The Agent receives a list from the boss which includes certain names that they want back and he lets us know ... also lets us know if he needs additional girls for us to try to recruit them.

HH It is not the same telling them as if they can actually see something... This way they can form an idea of where and how you work

KF Let me ask you what do you do on weekends?

END SIDE ASIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

[Everybody answers at the same time lots of voice ... nothing audible.]

What we would like to bring with us is what we can not bring with us.

I would be perfectly happy and having a wonderful life if I had here with me my father, my mother, brothers and sisters, my children

KF And what was it that made them make the decision to come so far away?

Necessity. The need for a better salary is what made us leave our families, our homes, our country because in Mexico and in any other country that is not this one you can not find a well remunerated job you might find a job but the pay is so little that it is not enough for anything.

KF And are you able to save a good sum of money?

Not a great amount because we are constantly sending money to Mexico. we have a responsibility towards our parents, towards our children so we constantly send them money ... that way I am sure that my family is not suffering, that they have food to put on the table, the necessary medicines if they get sick enough money to pay on time the electricity bill in order not to have interruptions in the service.

KF Are they the only supporters of their families or do other members of the family also work and contribute towards expenses?

On no, I am not the only one.... everybody works I have a brother here at the plant, another one in Virginia, the two of us here but my brother, he works for his own family we might as well work hard now that we are able to do so.... one never knows how long

/¹,

we will be able to go on...

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Do you get very tired working at the plant?

Yes, a lot ... my hands hurt, my lower back hurts a lot

●

I have noticed that there are some girls that seem to be dancing while they are working ... they have a special rhythm....

[They all laugh and giggle]

I have been told that, but I don't notice it myself ..I do it unconsciously...
... each one finds the easiest or most comfortable way to do the job.
I cannot work while standing up others cannot work sitting
down others take turns standing up and sitting down.

KF

Why do they think that they only bring women for this job?

Yes, they bring some men...

HH

How many men are working in this plant?

One! One man who came with his wife he is the only man who
picks crab meat in this plant there are other men working at the
plant but they work outside steaming, loading, unloading,
cleaning but not picking

[Note: we never saw a man picking crabs at Phillips. There is one at Ruark's who picks
with his wife]

[More girls are coming into the room, they turn on the television set and take their
seats quietly]

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At what time does your Soap Opera start?

Soon....

KF

I would like to ask each one of them to sign this sheet authorizing
the Museum to integrate this tape into their files and to be used
by staff members and public in general.

How much are we getting paid for that? (Jokingly)

[Everybody laughs!]

KF

I have not forgotten about the photos I took of you it is just
that I have not received them I promise I will get them to you

as soon as I get them.

HH These photos you should show to your relatives when you get home so that they can see the place where you work, how you work, how hard you work -when they see the number of crabs in front of you...

We do tell them all about our work

KF What do you do when you come home from work?

I shower, eat and sleep! I come home very tired my hands hurt a lot! I scratch them or hurt them every day ... and the salt water of the crabs makes it worst....

HH **Do** you put some vaseline on your hands?

Yes, I do, but it does not help much....

Hey, Sofia, come and join us...

Sofia You did not include me in the interview from the beginning... .that is why I stayed away....

Hello Dona Chole (another lady comes in)

Noises, voices, nothing audible,,,,, tape ends abruptly.

END TAPE