

Interview Log

Interviewee: Aracely Hernandez Salinas, Maria Cuevas Hernandez, Lily Alarcon
Tape #: OH133

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault; Hellen Holland translator & transcriber
of Tapes: 1 of 1

Date: 8/26/99 **# of Sides:** 2

Location: crab picker housing for Rippons Seafood on Hoopers Island, Hooperville MD

Topic: crab picking, travel from Mexico, work conditions, cross cultural situations

Corresponding Photography Log #: series 1009 in Crab Picking project

Comments: File name: OH133. See fieldnotes FN08.26.99. *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information or an aside by the fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription unless otherwise noted."

Entire tape transcribed, so direct quotes. However, the Spanish was not included by the transcriber, only the English translations. In addition, please note that the conversations between the fieldworker and the translator that occurred during the interview are also not transcribed.

BEGIN SIDE A

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

END TAPE

August 26th, 1999 - Visit in Hoopersville, Md., to conduct
Personal interviews with Mexican girls working at Rippons
Seafood - ;610 Steamboat Street.

KF Please tell me your full names and where do you com from in Mexico.

I am Aracely Hernandez Salinas from Mexico, from San Luis Potosi.

●

Another relative of the President?

Laughter I wish.

My Name is Maria Cuevas Hernandez Maria Cuevas vemgo del
Estado de Morelos, de Cuernavaca.

●

And you?

My name is Lily Alarcon and I come from Hidalgo.

KF Can you tell me how you heard about this work?

This is my first time and learned about it by word of mouth.... people
talking about it,

HH Were you acquainted with someone who had come here before?

Yes, I knew some girls and they told me about how the place looks
and what kind of work is expected of you. So I went and applied.

Did they hire you soon or did you have to wait a long time to be accepted?

No, no time at all I was hired soon--within four months,

●

Did you have any help with obtaining the necessary papers?

No, I had to do all that all by myself.

Where did you obtain your passport?

Right there, in the State of San Luis Potosi in the Capital City of the State.

HH And then, did you get any help with getting your transportation ticket and your Working Permit.

Yes, since we had vacancies in the crab work she put me soon on the bus from San Luis Potosi to Monterrey where I got my visa. And my working permit and they tell me how long I can remain in the country.

HH All this happens in Monterrey?

No, in Laredo we have to cross the border into this country. We get a working visa, not a tourist visa.

They all start comparing notes, talking at the same time and it is hard to hear what they say.

KF What did your friends tell you about the crabs, the work, the trip....

The trip I never imagined it was going to be so long, so tiring, so boring and about work.... that it could be bad, hard, tiring, painful that there could be some unfriendly co-workers ... that I would ruin my **hands**

KF And you still came?

I thought they were exaggerating and decided to try it myself

KF And how did they describe the crabs to you?

I already had an idea of what they were like I had seen them before...

HH Yes, but one thing is having seen some crabs and another this is working at them....

I had not the slightest idea of what was done to the crabs....

HH Who taught you? Who trained you?

One of the Mexican girls who already knew how to do it

HH How long did it take you to learn did you learn fast?

No, it took me some time. The first day I was given four small crabs and was left alone to do what I could.

HH And how many pounds did you pick the first day?

I made 3 lbs from eight o'clock in the morning.

HH And how long did it take you to develop speed to produce more meat per day?

I am still learning... I have been working at it for two months and now I am able to produce around 21lbs. Per day.

HH I think you are learning fast

KF What does your contract say.... how many pounds are you supposed to pick?

22lbs and three-quarters after three weeks of training... after we reach that goal we start getting paid per pound we produce before that we were paid by the hour.

KF And now that you are not working all day long how many pounds can you produce?

Working until 2 PM we make about 23 lbs. Or 24lbs.... it all depends on how fleshy the crabs are.... today they were not good and I only made 14 IN and 3/4, yesterday I made 17lbs.. Crabs are very small, they do not have much flesh and if it is fleshy the meat is not heavy

KF Well, have they gone back to pay you by the hour now?

Yes, we are being paid by the hour now but not all of us.... only those who are still in the process of being trained.

KF And you?

I was here last year I went through the learning stage last year it was easier for me this time.

KF And you?

This is also my second year.

KF Would you consider coming back next year?

Giggles yes, we think so.

KF What is your first impression when you first enter into the crab Picking room?

The first couple of steps that I took in.... I felt like turning around. That smell !!!!!!!

KF Do you ever get used to that smell?

Yes ... nowadays I don't even notice it ... when I am working... .but The smell is very "penetrante"it gets into your skin, your clothes, your hair, your shoes

KF Had you seen this particular kind of crabs in Mexico before you came here.

Yes, we had seen them but only alive.

HH Had you eaten crabs before you came here?

No, No I did not know that they could be cooked and eaten....

I never thought of that

HH Do you eat crab meat here?

Yes, we like it when we have reached our goal and we do not want to work any more at the plant, we eat some meat.

KF And how is it to work in a place where you do not speak the language?

It is not easy. ..when n we have a problem and we cannot explain or express ourselves it is very difficult we have some kind of interpreter... .David is nice and he speaks a little Spanish. There is another fellow, a black man, who does not speak Spanish at all but he understand what we are trying to say.

HH And if you do not feel well if you feel sick, what do you do?

Well, we go to the lady-boss and with gestures we try to tell her what is wrong. But we are lucky, we have not become sick

not last year and not this year, insofar.

HH"

Not one of you girls have become sick?

Well, yes when we first arrived we felt funny, kind of sick I think it was due to the change in altitude, the different kind of food our sleeping schedule...

●

that is only natural, it happens to everybody. When I go to Mexico city I feel dizzy and very weak due to the high altitude and then I get the revenge of Montezuma

I was very lucky.... Nothing affected me, I never felt sick.

The altitude did not affect me.... but the food did and I did not like it.

KF

I want to ask you about the money you send home what is it for?

We send it to our parents..

KF

Do they save it for you?

They do with it as we ask them to do. Of course it is mainly to help them with the household expenses and the taking care of our children but since they do not need all of the money we send, they save the rest for our return and that is the main reason why we are here.

KF

And does the money lasts until the day they come home?

Usually yes.... not much though ... unless there has been a serious emergency. But also, as soon as I get back to Mexico I start working at my other job.

●

Do you also go back to work as soon as you get home?

No, I don't work outside the house I have a little store right there in our house and I help my mother with the house chores.

I do work outside the house and go back to my old job as soon as I get there.

The telephone rang and they became excited because it was a call from Mexico.

●

Do you call home often?

We call every other week.

● Do you usually get a good connection?

Yes we use a card that we can buy here and by using that card it is cheaper.

● It is cheaper to call at night....

Yes but we cannot take advantage of the night fees because where we live we do not have a telephone we have to go to the telegraph office in the nearest town to make or receive the call.

● They become happy when they hear your voice....

Yes.... I am very close to my father but my mother cries when I am ready to hang up/

KF How did you convince your parents that it was OK for you to come here?

They would respect my decision: if I wanted to come they would support me.

KF And you?

Well, the same my mother was a little reluctant and fearful that I would go to such a far away and unknown place Last year, when the time to go home approached I kept saying "I want to go back to my mother"!!

HH It is only natural.

KF I want to ask you a question about do you always sit at the same place at work?

Yes, each of us has its own place.

KF And does it matter who do you sit next to?

Yes, sometimes it does, because there are some girls who like to talk too much and they distract us by talking too much you can not work as fast although sometimes we all feel like talking especially on Mondays.

● What do you talk about Monday morning?

what did we do over the weekend if we had any visitors....

●

Do the young men from Easton come visiting?

Yes, from Easton, from Georgetown, from Marydel sometimes my brother comes visiting from Carolina. He is also under contract working in a tobacco farm.

●

It is quite a distance for him to drive just to come visiting you...

Yes, but we are fond of each other and we miss each other and he does not come that often.

HH

Can he spend the night here in this house?

No.... he does not come alone it would have to be only if all the girls agree that it is alright but they usually take turns driving and they don't mind driving at night.

KF

Let me go back to the work set up.... what is the ideal setup how do you have to have your tools and your cups...

Each one has her own way of organizing herself.

KF

Have each one describe to me the way they do it.

●

How do you prepare your area?

Well I try to take the shell off, and remove the little legs...
And I always have my container on the right side.

Another girl comes to join the group.

●

And who do we have here?

This is Juana, Juanita.

●

And how long have you been here?

Four months.... and this is my first time.

HH

And do you feel comfortable being here?

Yes, everybody has been very nice to me.

●

How long did it take you to feel comfortable with the new work, your place of living, the food, etc...

About one month.... the first day I only worked 4 hours and made only 3 lbs but after 3 weeks I was picking the required amount. I was able to learn fast and to work fast nowadays I deliver 30 or 321bs.

KF Do you pick more crab meat than the other non-Mexican ladies?

Well there is a special lady, Brenda, who for instance yesterday she delivered 40 lbs it is a lot, she works very, very fast.

KF Do you get tired?

Yes, my back hurts?

KF Do you change positions? Do you sometimes work while standing up?

No, I cannot work while on my feet I only stand up to rest.

HH Are the seats, the chairs, comfortable?

No, they are not! They are so hard! some of the girls bring cushions from home

KF How did the neighbors greet you when you first moved into this house?

They were nice but distant. They say hello but they are not friendly.
The only one with whom we talk is the lady on the other side... she works with us.

KF What do they tell their families about their work?

I tell lies I tell them that it is easy work, that it is not too tiring,,
but last year when I came home my father took my hands into his
looked at them and said "you have worked hard".

KF Did he see any marks?

Yes, I had had an infection with a piece of shell that went inside my skin and with the salty water of the crabs it hurt very much and later it became infected, I had puss I could not get it out and the more I tried the worst it got... finally I showed it to my boss and she took me to the hospital to be taken care of it.

HH None of you wear gloves ?

Some of them do.... I only wear them when I cut myself

I cannot work with gloves when I cut myself I wear a Band-Aid and a finger-protector.

HH You should not hide the complete truth from your families otherwise then will have the impression that what you send home is easy money.

By just telling them the hours that we work, how early we have to get up they can tell that it is not easy they are so different from the working hours at home.

KF How are they different?

Here we are picked up at 3:15 in the morning. In Mexico we start at 8:00 AM... minimum 6 hrs., maximum 8 hrs., with time for lunch. We earn little but we work little here is the opposite... if we could only have here the Mexican working hours

Everybody laughs....

But it is alright, we get used to it this is a developed country, they have a good government

HH You are going to have elections in your country soon, don't you?

Yes, by the end of the year and we will not be able to vote for Our next president.

HH You are not able to vote from here?

No we would have to go to our Embassy in Washington, D.C. It would not make much difference, the party in power (PRI) will be reelected. "Mas vale lo viejo conocido que lo nuevo par conocer" (old adverb)

HH Would you like to come back next year?

Yes I am becoming attached to crabs

HH They are going to call you crab-ladies back home

They already do, they call us "jaiberas" although we do not have jaibas (crabs) at home.... we see some in the market but they are not the same they are not from the sea.... they come from rivers.

KF When they come here, what do they bring with them from home?

We all bring photos I bring coffee, some peppers they giggle
we bring a few special things with us

HH Don't you buy groceries at the Mexican market in Easton?

We don't go there, he -Don Tono- comes here on weekends with
his van full of merchandise we buy chocolate from Morelia,
tortillas, cheese, peppers, etc... ingredients to make Tacos,

Who makes tacos?

She does she gets up earlier in order to cook.... she starts the night
before....

At what time do you go to bed?

We try to go to bed at 7,,,,,but most of the time we end up going to bed
at 10 P.M.

You don't sleep much, then

No, we barely sleep 5 hours,,,,,

HH Do you get sleepy while you are working?

Yes, sometimes but we drink coffee to wake up we usually take
a late nap after we come home from work

A nap is very relaxing and "nutritious"

Oh yes! We feel much better afterwards

HH Do you have a television set here?

No, we don't we would have to pay more if we had one

KF How much are you paying now?

\$30.00 each per week we would love to have a set but without and
increase in pay.

KF Do you think \$30.00 a week is too much?

Yes, because we leave our homes to come to work in order to be able to
save some money and they make it more difficult for us. Last year it

was only \$25,00 each per week

HH Were there more girls last year, perhaps?

No, we are all the same

HH What did they tell you when they raised the rent what reason did they give you?

Nothing ah! She said that the other plants were charging \$30.00 that is \$120.00 per month and I have friends who pay \$70.00 per month in Marydel

KF Are they the only picking plant in the island?

Yes no, there is another one... called Indy.... I think.

END OF SIDE ONE

HH Are there any Mexican girls there?

Yes, quite a few....

HH Do you visit with them?

No, we never see them we hardly know them....

HH Are they not from your hometown?

No, they come from a different region of Mexico last year there were a few girls from our towns and we visited with them

KF And do they know any of the girls who work in the other plants?

Very few of them....

KF And what about church?

Some times we are able to go to church

Do you go to Father Joel's or to the Catholic church?

I don't think I don't know if there is a Catholic church here
We go to Phillips with Father Joel, sometimes he comes to get us, other times they take us in the van...

KF And what do they do on weekends?

Sometimes we have to work on Saturdays... .when there are a lot of crabs.
Otherwise we stay home ... or we take walks I myself, I sleep a lot
Or we go to the beach.... sometimes we go dancing in Georgetown or
to Seaford...

●

Do you go in the van or do friends take you there?

Friends take us there.

HH When do they have dances there?

Mostly on Saturdays...

HH What kind of music American or Mexican?

Both... sometimes we have a live band... .there are a couple of groups
in Easton.

●

Until what time do you dance?

Until 2:00 in the morning.... and that is why we sleep all day on Sunday. .
The boys are nice to us first they take us out to dinner and then we
go dancing...

●

Are these boys all from Easton?

Some are from Easton and others are from Georgetown in Georgetown
they are mostly from Guatemala, only one is from Mexico.

●

Do they have Mariachis?

No, they play records and tapes when there is not a live band/....we love
it when they play Mexican music.

KF Can I ask them how old they are?

I am 21 years of age I am 19 I am 22 years of age.

KF And for how long do you think you will be coming back here?

As long as we want to I think I will only come back once more....

KF And what makes you set that limit?

It is very hard work it is tiring but I really don't know I will decide from year to year.

I think I will make it three years in all.

KF I am wondering.... being here for so long.... is it easy to find someone you want to marry when you go home?

We are not thinking about that at this time but if we find someone he will wait for us some of us spend 8 months here from April to December my visa is valid until the 15th of December and they usually send us home around the 10th.

HH So you spend the feast of the immaculate Conception here (It is a big celebration in Mexico, the 8th of December)

Yes, we spend many Mexican big festivities here" November 20th.... And our Independence Day on September 16th

HH Do you celebrate it here?

Yes, by sleeping all the time and try not to think how they are celebrating at home although we are thinking just thinking, how nice it would be if we could get together with the Mexican girls from the other plants and have a nice big celebration but we are just thinking about it Last year we celebrated among ourselves and nobody understood why and what were we celebrating because nobody here know anything about Mexico.

KF Since they spend from 6 to 8 months each year in this area, to they feel that they have two homes, one here and one in Mexico?

Yes, when we leave here we leave crying we leave memories and have to separate from each other after having been so close for such a long time but once we cross the border into Mexico our feelings change and all our thoughts are about the home of our parents

KF And have they gotten used to it or does it bother them to keep going back and forth year after year?

no, it is a way of life actually, I like it when I go home I am happy that I am going to see my family and old friends again when I come back here I am looking forward to see my old co-workers again... And I know that after a few long months I will be going back home again.

KF And would you convince some other member of your family to come and work here?

it would be easy to bring my young sister with me.... all I have to do is mention her name to my boss and she would request her.... But for me it is a big responsibility because she has to work hard, meet The set amount of pounds in three weeks, she has to behave and if **she** does not respond ...I would feel bad since I am responsible for her.

KF Aha! and do the others feel the same way?

Yes, because if the first girl that we recommend fails us then we can never ask for someone else to be brought here.
This year, three girls have had to leave the plant

KF Do they go back to Mexico or do they stay in the area?

They stay around here...

KF What makes them stay?

....the possibility of finding another job as to myself, I stay even if there is little work because if I leave early, then next year when I approach the person in charge I will not be accepted to come back. I signed a contract for a certain number of months and I am going to stick with it regarding of how much money I am making And if I stay on my own I would have to stay for God only knows how many years while my family is in Mexico this way I know that I can go back every year those who stay on their own have lots of problems and stay longer and longer

KF We have not talked much about their bus ride

Tiring 3 days and 3 nights in the bus stopping to eat and when we have to change buses we changed about 10 times since leaving Monterrey until we arrived in Monterrey.... yes it is tedious and very tiring I stand up, I sit down, nothing helps I sleep[but do not rest other girls have it easier when the middle-man reunites girls coming to several plants and then they charter a bus that makes a direct trip.

HH" And what about the return trip?

The same, long and tiring but at least we are all together... .it feels shorter from here to the border from there on it feels an eternity before we get home.

HH

Is the family anxiously waiting for you?

Yes, all the members of the family congregate in our [home.to](#) wait for our arrival....

KF

And how do you entertain yourselves in the bus trip for three days and three nights?

We talk to each other.... sometimes we try to strike a conversation with the bus driver who-does. not speak a word of Spanish we tell jokes, we sing, we eat.

And what. happens if you came late.... do you go home all by yourself?

Last year only two girls stayed behind. -

KF

And how much does the bus ride cost?

From Laredo it was \$110.00

HH

And do you have to pa for it yourselves....?

Yes, all the expenses during the trip are covered by us passport, visa, etc.

KF

When do you start saving the money to pay for all these things?

Here... in two weeks in Mexico it would take months.

KF

So, when they are in Mexico, trying to get here, how do they get the money to pay for these expenses?

Some of the girls get a loan that they will be able to pay back once they start working here others have had a job before coming here and have been saving for some time sometimes our parents help us.

KF

Ah! OK It is quite a responsibility to borrow money to come here...

Yes, sometimes the agent (the middle-man) gives us a loan....

KF

What rate of interest does he charge you?

Fifteen percent to be paid within 2 months.

KF

What would they like other people to know about this work?

HH

In Mexico?

KF

Lets start about in Mexico and then about here,

In what sense?

HH

Well, for instance: I go into a restaurant and order some crab meat., I eat it and enjoy it.... but I don't know how much work someone had to do in order for me to eat it and enjoy it

You are right my hands sometimes swell when I get hurt, they hurt a lot.... I soak them in hot water to alleviate the pain ... people do not know about this, about our suffering both physical and mental.

KF

So, it is really hard work.

They offer us a cold drink

KF

Let me go back to their impression of the smell of the crab when they go back to Mexico do they still feel the smell or think bout it?

No, no when we get to Mexico we try to forget everything about this work! the only thing that remains with me is awakening at 2:30 in the morning I awake suddenly, scared of missing the ride thinking I have to go to work then I realize I am home so I turn over and go back to sleep in peace.

KF

Aha!....and for how long do you do that?

About three weeks.

Some times I jump out of bed and half asleep I start getting dressed before realizing that I am in my own home.

HH

And when you come back here is it hard for you to get used again to getting up so early in the morning?

It is the hardest thing!

HH

Do you have an alarm clock?

Yes, but nobody hears it the van picks up at 3:15 A.M the first few days we go half-asleep and we even fall asleep in the van. When it is cold weather the cold keeps us awake.

HH

Is it much colder here than where you come from? Have you had snow?

Where I come from it does get cold during the winter months but never as cold as it gets here. We have not had snow here in Mexico you only have snow in Mexico City, in Coahuila, Monterrey.... there are a few very high volcanoes that have their cones always covered with snow.

HH How about heat? Is it this hot in Mexico?

Yes, sometimes here we do not notice it because we do not go out... Just from home to work and from work to home by car.... in Mexico we do not use cars, we walk to wherever we have to go and here we have air conditioners and back home we don't.

KF And how did the locals treat them when they first arrived?

Yes, they are nice they welcome us when we first arrive... .when we leave they wish us a safe journey., the boss gives us a farewell party

KF How about shopping? Who goes to the market?

We take turns ... we also take turns cooking one or two every day. We prepare something special when someone has a birthday....

At this point a few girls come into the house with lots and lots of grocery bags... .there is hardly enough room for all this in The refrigerator this has to last for two weeks.

Lots of voices, all the girls are excited about the arrival of the groceries, they all talk at the same time they all start unpacking

Tape ends abruptly.