



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Willie Barela

DATE OF BIRTH: August 7, 1930 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: March 21, 2001

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Barela residence, Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM ☒ OTHER ☐

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: March 30, 2001

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Jane O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: May 10, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Worked on Stahmann Farms during World War II at the same time as German and Italian prisoners of war were employed there.

DATE RANGE: 1943-1945

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Willie Barela and his family worked on Snow Ranch, a division of Stahmann Farms beginning in 1943. They moved to Snow Ranch from the Santo Tomas portion of Stahmann Farms. They worked with the German prisoners of war for two years. He was told not to “get too close” to the prisoners of war, “because they were bad people.” The families employed by Stahmanns and the “bracero” workers were separated from the prisoners of war.

One of the consultant’s jobs, in addition to chopping and picking cotton, was to drive a tractor and take water to all the workers. The workers were supposed to be separated even when they went to get water, but there were opportunities for POWs to speak to the other workers, and one POW in particular, Walter Schmid, would attempt to communicate with them.

Barela also worked with Italian POWs but didn’t “associate” with them much. He remembers the guards were “right there,” and there was “good security . . . we never heard of nobody running away.”

The foreman or assistant foreman was responsible for instructing the POWs in how to do farm work.

As a boy of thirteen or fourteen, he was not aware that the POWs had a quota they had to meet in picking cotton. To his knowledge none of the other workers had a quota. They were paid five cents a pound for the cotton they picked. All family members picked cotton, “even . . . my baby sister . . . she was probably about six years old . . .”

In addition to onions, cantaloupe, and cotton, the Stahmanns were also producing pecans by the 1940s, and were raising sheep. Much of Snow Ranch had yet to be cleared during the time in question.

Mr. Barela and his brother did not attend school, because their father had injured his back and was unable to support the family on what he was able to earn. He states that he was initially a poor cotton picker, but eventually could pick 200-250 pounds of cotton a day.

He believes that the family workers and the bracero workers worked longer hours than the POWs.

His family was given a receipt at the end of the day for the amount of cotton they picked. This was totaled at the end of the week “and they would sent it to . . . the commissary,” where the families would buy groceries. Housing was provided by Stahmann Farm, but they had to purchase kerosene. They had electricity, but heating the house with the kerosene stove could be dangerous, “we almost asphyxiated with the fumes.”

When not picking cotton, Barela was paid “a dollar a day for twelve hours, you know, from sunup to sundown.” He believes his father was paid \$2.50 to \$3.00, because he operated a tractor and later on a bulldozer.

The family moved to Santo Tomas, Stahmann Farms from Magdalena, New Mexico, in 1940 then moved over to Snow Ranch, and back to Santo Tomas after the war. In 1945, Stahmann purchased the Circle Cross Ranch in the Sacramento Mountains, and the Barelas went there to “clear the timber.”

The foreman had warned the families with children to keep them away from the POWs. However, eventually Willie and his brother started communicating with POW, Walter Schmid. They traded food and cigarettes with the POWs for inexpensive jewelry.

He believes the POWs were “sometimes” hungry, because he observed the Italian POWs “eating onions like apples” in the fields, and also saw POWs eating cantaloupes. He declares, “they were hungry. But it wasn’t up to us . . . why we, we couldn’t do anything.” He doesn’t recall that the POWs were ever given anything by the foremen to supplement their rations.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

He remembers that they would start picking cotton in the third or fourth week of August. In December, the pecan harvest would begin. They were paid twenty-five cents a pound for picking pecans. They like pecan harvest because the pecans were heavier and they could earn more. “Mr. Stahmann didn’t want one pecan to be . . . [left] in the field at all.”

Mr. Stahmann made the rounds on all the farms. There were three foremen on the Snow Ranch, and they would also have assistants. Each foreman was responsible for a certain number of acres.

Mr. Barela recalls additional crops raised on Stahmann farms: alfalfa, lettuce, and sugar beets. They did a great deal of soil amendment at that time.

The consultant was “one of the only young ones” that worked year around at Stahmann Farms. He operated heavy equipment, drove truck, and also worked in Stahmann’s cotton gin. He left Stahmann Farms in 1949.

He believes that when his family moved to Snow Ranch in 1943 the houses were only three or four years old. They didn’t have indoor plumbing, but had a faucet for water outside their door and outdoor toilets.

He discusses the commissary at Stahmann Farms. He states that a worker could “arrange to buy a car” through the commissary. He states that buying there, the families were not subject to the rationing during World War II. The workers could choose to shop elsewhere, if they wished. Dr. Jenkins and his nurse provided medical care to the workers at Stahmann Farms.

Barela discusses that education of children was a family decision, not a farm policy. He attended school for a year and a half or two years at San Miguel. His oldest brother was electrocuted at the compress at Stahmann Farms in 1948 or 1949.

During the war he believes “about nine families, an’ about . . . twenty to thirty braceros” worked at Snow Ranch. Some of the women in the families didn’t work in the field, but instead were paid to cook and launder for the braceros. Other women did chop and pick cotton, but did not do heavier labor. Women also cut weeds on the irrigation ditches.

The foremen at Stahmann always rode horse, (they did not begin to drive pickup until 1949 or 1950) allowing them to “sneak up on us (laugh).”

None of the jewelry traded by the POWs for food has been saved, because much of it was subsequently traded by the boys for candy, comic books, and Spanish language books with a trader who came from Juarez each weekend to valley farms. Snow Ranch was approximately eight miles from the commissary in Santo Tomas.