

## Interview with Mexican Migrant Jose Flores about Farm Security Administration (FSA) Camps, 1941

**Interviewer:** Well, why don't you tell me about the sort of setup they have at this camp.

**Jose Flores:** What camp?

**Interviewer:** This camp here in El Rio.

**Flores:** You mean the world around the camp.

**Interviewer:** Yep.

**Flores:** Well, we form different committees like the sanitary committee. That committee is in charge of keeping sanitation in the camp. Every morning, the committee, or somebody goes around the camp and checks that everything is clean and in order. And if it isn't, they contact the work foreman. It's the foreman's job is that he gets around and gets different fellas to do the work in the camp. To keep the camp in good order and clean. That's the job of the sanitary committee. And we have a, what do we call it, [inaudible] committee

**Unidentified Man:** Welfare.

**Flores:** Welfare committee. That welfare committee tries to see if the families are in a good position concerning food or clothes, whatever clothes they can obtain from the church or some other offices or agencies. They try to distribute those clothes to whoever needs 'em. The worst. What — we have a reception committee, don't we? We have a reception committee. They try to show visitors around the camp and tell them different things we've got and the work that we are doing. And we have an employment office, or a man that runs the employment office here. If a farmer comes in here and needs some help on his ranch, he — we try to send him to the agency man and he kind of asks him for how many men he needs. And he tells him what he is willing to pay.

**Interviewer:** What sort of work are people doing now?

**Flores:** Well, some are working on ranches, doing general ranch work. Some of them are hoeing wheat, oh I mean hoeing beans and they hoe wheats amongst the beans. And some of them are picking lemons out in the other neighboring counties, Santa Barbara County. Those are owing to the strike that we had here before. They just refused to pick lemons here. They were picking lemons in the neighboring county.

**Interviewer:** Before people came into this camp, where did they live?

**Flores:** Before they came to this camp? Well, they lived in company-owned camps. By company, I mean the lemon associations and companies for which they worked. These companies had their own

homes and they keep their men there because they need them in the winter time for smudgy, which means lighting smudge pudge when it gets too cold. And they happen to come to this camp here because they were evicted from the company-owned camps because they went on a strike trying to get a little better wages than they were getting. And the growers refused to give them the wages, and so they went on strike. And because they went on strike, they were evicted. So, it was necessary that this camp here had to come into the county, so it could give these people who were evicted homes — or housing.

**Interviewer:** What were the homes on the ranches like?

**Flores:** Well, at the ranches that I lived, they are supposed to be about the best homes in company-owned camps. For example, my home is one of the biggest at that camp, because we are a big family. It has three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and a bathroom. And just a six-room house with a bathroom. Before it never used to have any electric lights or water system inside, and it didn't have a ceiling. Now they are putting in a ceiling, an electric light system and a bathroom — and other facilities like the toilet.

**Interviewer:** Well then, what about the places you live in in the camp here? What are they like?

**Flores:** Well, here, we're living in tents. Just a platform and then a tent on top of the platform.

**Interviewer:** How did most of the people feel about who came in here?

**Flores:** Well, the time that they came in here, they just felt it was the best thing to do so they could keep on the strike. They didn't worry that the tents were not like home. Like home they used to live in or anything because they felt it was what they should do to be able to keep up the strike.

**Interviewer:** They wanted to stay together here then?

**Flores:** Well, the main purpose was that they wanted to stick together, because only by sticking together could they obtain a gain in the strike or even if it wasn't a strike, in other forms of life, they could at least learn how to work together and different things.

**Interviewer:** What do you think most of them want? What is the main ambition right now?

**Flores:** Well, the main ambition now is to get a better wage than what they're getting, because the cost of living right now is very expensive. They can't make a living 27½ cents an hour, that's what they get paid for work. It would be alright if steady work all the year through but sometimes they don't work the whole day or probably won't work for a week or so. And they feel that the thing they need most now is to be recognized as a union and get a better wage.

**Interviewer:** And they would like to get back to living on the ranches.

**Flores:** Yes, they would like to go back to the camps. But they refuse to go back unless they go back as a union. Or as a group. They don't want to go back as individuals, because they know very well that three weeks or a month from the time they go back, they'll get fired. And as a group, they won't be able to fire them all.

**Interviewer:** I wonder about your reaction as to the Okies coming in? When the Mexicans were put out, a lot of the Okies took their place, didn't they?

**Flores:** When the Okies were put in before the Mexicans were put out because they were living in the groves. They had to their trailers and tents in the groves. They were all ready to go in as soon as the Mexicans were thrown out. Their reaction against them, it wasn't so bad because they felt that the Okies are just a poor laboring class just like ourselves. And at the time that they were brought in, they were promised good wages and they were promised that their wives would work at the ranches that the strike was on. And they were hungry and didn't have enough money to keep up so they thought it was a good chance to make a little money and fill their stomachs up with food. So, we didn't feel bad against them, we didn't have anything against them because we just thought they were pushed in the same as a laboring class. They were hungry and they were pushed in as the same that we could have been pushed into one of their own strikes, probably. So we didn't feel bad against them.