

Interview with Martin Mauricio

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DePue: My name is Mark DePue; I am the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Thursday, July 20—excuse me, July 31, 2008. I'm here to talk to Martin Mauricio—did I say your name correct?

Mauricio: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: Okay. And Martin works for Chris Eckert, and as I understand you have for the last eighteen years, is that correct?

Mauricio: Yeah, it's eighteen years by now.

DePue: What exactly do you do for Chris?

Mauricio: Well, when I was coming up for the first time, I was doing the same work as doing now, I was picking peaches. Now I'm trying to help him running the crew down in the field, make sure everything is right, the fruit, everybody's picking the way we want it, and make sure nobody's picking green stuff, and that's really my job to—

DePue: Would it be fair to call you the manager of the migrant workforce then?

Mauricio: Yeah, pretty much, I'm like the manager.

DePue: Okay. Martin, when and where were you born?

Mauricio: I'm born to Mexico, and my state is Michoacán, and my little city, it's Paracho, Michoacán, it's where I'm from. And I'm—

DePue: And your birthday?

Mauricio: My birthday's October 18, 1971.

DePue: October 1971?

Mauricio: No, December 18—

DePue: Nineteen seventy-one.

Mauricio: Nineteen seventy-one.

DePue: Okay, I'm sorry. What were your parents doing for a living?

Mauricio: Well, my father, he was down there doing pretty much like farming too. He was down there farming like corn. I'd never do like fruit stuff.

DePue: Was this a rural community then, in the country where you grew up?

Mauricio: Yeah, pretty much, it's the stuff we do down there, so it's something I really like to do in this way.

DePue: Okay. So you took to farming from an early age?

Mauricio: Yeah, I was helping my dad down there, but I never thought about it, I would be right here. And when I was coming up here, I'm just trying to keep working, and—

DePue: Okay. Born in 1971, what's the first year you came to the United States to work?

Mauricio: I came up here, it was in 1989.

DePue: Why did you come?

Mauricio: Well, you know how the Mexico's economy with the stuff. So I have some uncle, he was up here, and he was talking to mine, and I was like, "Well, can I go too?" So he'll bring me up here, and I was just coming—my roommate was just coming for like one year and then go back, and then that was my—

DePue: That was your initial plan?

Mauricio: Yeah, it was my plan, because I was thinking, when I get here, It's a different language, and I don't think I'm going to stay so long here. (laughter)

DePue: Okay. So you were how old when you first came?

Mauricio: I think I was like eighteen, nineteen, something like that, when I was—

DePue: How much education did you have?

Mauricio: I went just to high school.

DePue: Did you complete high school?

Mauricio: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. And that obviously was in Mexico.

Mauricio: Yeah, it was down there in Mexico.

DePue: Were there not opportunities for you in Mexico?

Mauricio: No, not really, because like I said, my dad, with the economy, and my family, there was like seven in the family, and I'm the older. So when I was coming up here, I was trying to help my dad to raise my brother and my sister like we normally do down there.

DePue: Was this your dad's idea for you to come up here, or was it yours?

Mauricio: No, it was mine, because my dad, he don't want me to come up here.

DePue: He did not?

Mauricio: No, he did not. (laughter)

DePue: Why not?

Mauricio: Well, the first thing was because I'm young, so he don't want me to come this way, because I don't know nothing. But I was just, I wanted to come, and my uncle says, "No, he will be fine." It was real hard, because I don't tell my dad I was here in this way. (laughter)

DePue: Oh, you didn't?

Mauricio: No.

DePue: How about your mom?

Mauricio: Nobody. I was just like, "We're working another state down there in Mexico." Because they don't like me to come this way.

DePue: And the next thing they knew, you, what, you called or wrote from the United States?

Mauricio: Well, I was calling after like two months, yeah.

DePue: Was there an expectation on your part that you would send money back to the family to help them?

Mauricio: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: Where was the first place you found work in the United States?

- Mauricio: Well, my uncle, when he was working down there in Texas. Center, Texas, it was a little town, we was working down there, doing a Christmas tree planting.
- DePue: What was the name of the town?
- Mauricio: Center.
- DePue: Center?
- Mauricio: Yeah, Center. It was the center of Texas, when I started working down there.
- DePue: In Christmas trees.
- Mauricio: Yeah, we was planting down there Christmas trees.
- DePue: So strictly on the planting side of these?
- Mauricio: Yeah.
- DePue: When you first came over, you were intending to just stay just a few weeks or months?
- Mauricio: Well, at first, when I started working in that one month, I always wanted to go back right away, because it was too tough. Every morning, get up, and I was no good in that way down there in Mexico. (laughter) So I was a little tired, because I had to get up in the morning, like six o'clock, and I'd have to fix my breakfast, my lunch, and I was not doing that there. So I was like, I think I'm going back to my country. It was for a couple months later, my uncle says, "You'll feel better later," and it was...
- DePue: How long were you doing this in Texas then?
- Mauricio: I was doing it for three years down there. It was in '98, '99, and in 2000. Yeah, '99-2000 is when I started talking about the papers. It was '98, '99. Nineteen ninety-nine.
- DePue: Started talking about papers.
- Mauricio: Yeah, papers, my I-9 papers.
- DePue: Your documentation.
- Mauricio: Yeah, my documentation, yeah.
- DePue: Okay. When did you start working for Eckerts then?
- Mauricio: I started working with Eckerts in 1990.

- DePue: And what brought you all the way from Texas to Illinois, and from Christmas trees to peaches?
- Mauricio: I remember this whole time, because we were down there. "Well, I can't work no more Christmas trees," it was too tough for me. The job, it was too heavy, you had to plant so many. So I had one of my friends, he said, "I'm heading to Illinois; you want to go with me?" I'm like, "I don't know." He said, "We're pruning trees down there." And I said, "Okay." So I went with him, and he brings me up here, and after two weeks, he left. So he left me right here. I started working up here. And that's how I get right here.
- DePue: What did you think when you first got to Illinois?
- Mauricio: Well, when I get here, I remember I was a little sad, because I don't know nobody. There was a couple more people right here, but I was just by myself. But then I started working, and I know how the job is, and I'll make it; it was not too hard for me pruning, trimming trees.
- DePue: Trimming peach trees.
- Mauricio: Yeah, peach trees.
- DePue: What time of the year did you get here?
- Mauricio: I think it was in December when we got here, and I was pruning apples when we get here. We started pruning apples.
- DePue: In the middle of winter?
- Mauricio: Yeah, we'd do it in the winter. Apple first.
- DePue: Well, that's kind of a different kind of year, to be coming from Texas to Illinois in December.
- Mauricio: Yeah. It was—
- DePue: What did you think of the weather?
- Mauricio: Well, I remember before, down there in Mexico, I was watching TV, movies, it was talking about big mountains of snow, and I was like, I don't think it's real. But when I was get right here, it was real. (laughter)
- DePue: So a little bit of a shock for you.
- Mauricio: Yeah. It was all...
- DePue: Did you go back every single year, to Mexico?
- Mauricio: Yeah, 2000, I was going back, going back, because I had my wife down there.

DePue: Okay. When did you get married?

Mauricio: Well, when I was coming up here, it was when I was coming, when I had my papers, I went back. It was in the 1999. So I married and I went back this way again.

DePue: Okay. So not until 1999 that you got married?

Mauricio: Yeah, another year, because when I went back, when I fixed my papers, down there in Texas, I went back right away, and that's what I headed this way to Illinois. I was working like seven months up here, and go back down and be with my family.

DePue: So you met your wife in Mexico.

Mauricio: Yeah.

DePue: Were you having a relationship for several years going back and forth then?

Mauricio: Yeah. Pretty much I was coming up here. We finished right here pretty much the harvest that's in October, we do apples and we start Christmas. But sometimes I would go back in October, and I was not going at Christmas, and I'd go back down here and stay down there for two months, and go up here back again for—

DePue: So you're coming back to Illinois about January?

Mauricio: Yeah.

DePue: Late December?

Mauricio: January, yeah.

DePue: And there was things for you to do in January here?

Mauricio: Yeah, we have, most of them, you start. You have to prune the trees when it's cold. So I trimmed the apples. So we worked sometimes when it's like five inches of snow, we're working that way outside, because it's great.

DePue: You like the outside.

Mauricio: Yeah. (laughter)

DePue: How did you get from just being one of the people working in the field and going back and forth every year to becoming the manager for the Eckerts?

Mauricio: Well, the other year, when I'm going down there and back, I was just like a normal worker. When he tell me, "You want to take this place?" I was like,

“Oh, yeah, it's great,” but it was not, because I can't go down there, back no more.

DePue: So the Eckerts offered you the opportunity to manage this?

Mauricio: Yeah, he opened.

DePue: So was there an expectation that that meant that you would also do some recruiting of the workforce?

Mauricio: Well, no, not really, because the other years, we had a lot of help. It was not the situation right now; it was a lot of help. We have a lot of Hispanic people coming up here, and sometimes some people, don't know, you know—it was needed the other year was somebody to teach the guys how to prune, how to do it, and that's when they was trying to tell me to.

DePue: Are you also responsible for finding workers that are a part of this H2A program that they're—?

Mauricio: Yeah. Pretty much I'm with this company helping anything I can. I do my job, and sometimes they need something else. If I know how to do it, just I help him to—

DePue: Well, you must encounter people who approach you and want to get work who you're not sure are legal here in the first place, they're illegal. Is that a problem?

Mauricio: When I came here with Eckerts, I had everything, I was ready, I had all my papers. And the other guys didn't want them looking at them. It's a thing we make sure we have our papers now.

DePue: But the other people that you're talking to, do all of them have papers? Do some of them present you with what looks like false documentation?

Mauricio: Yeah. It's the one thing I have to make sure I have the papers there, the one we needed for recording people.

DePue: How do you make sure that they're what they say they are?

Mauricio: Well, the thing is, we don't know which ones, we have our picture how they look like the paper we needed. So if they showed me that thing, and social security, so we're recording it. If they don't have it, we don't...

DePue: So it's the social security?

Mauricio: Yeah, social security card and resident card.

DePue: Resident?

- Mauricio: Resident card as well, the two things we're pretty much asking for.
- DePue: Are the people who work here on work visas then?
- Mauricio: Yeah. Now, pretty much everybody we have now, it's like Chris was talking about, it's like called H2 guys, so pretty much all the guys we have, it's coming from Mexico now. So everyone has got a visa now.
- DePue: It's a work visa.
- Mauricio: Yeah, a work visa.
- DePue: What are the terms of the work visa? Does that allow them to stay a certain number of months each year?
- Mauricio: Yeah, it's like, we have two shipments. We have the first shipment in Eckerts and we get the first group, and it's allowed here for six months, to stay right here. So these guys go back August 20, so they have to cross the border August 20, no later. If they want everything, keep doing this.
- DePue: So they have to return to Mexico no later than August 20?
- Mauricio: There is visas for August 20, so they can't necessarily like 21 in the United States, you've got to go that day out.
- DePue: But that's before the peak of the apple-picking season.
- Mauricio: Yeah. Well, we just get another crew. It's like, it's a month. So we recruit another crew, and this crew's going back home, and we recruit another one. So it's how we're trying to—
- DePue: And when you say we, you have agents back in Mexico who you are working with?
- Mauricio: Yeah, we have down there people to, we call them, "We need so many guys," and they send it. We pay everything for those guys. We pay transportation, we pay the ticket for the guys. When they get here, we've got everything, the room ready, dishes, blanket, everything. It's pretty much like a motel, you just get in there and ready to—
- DePue: So is this, the Eckerts are providing you houses?
- Mauricio: Yeah, it's the Eckerts providing that place.
- DePue: Well, how would you describe the housing unit that the average worker would get?

Mauricio: Well, we have like, it's like apartments; it's not the houses, like apartments we have. The law tell us what do we have to do, so they're coming down there and check how many rooms we are allowed to, people to keep.

DePue: These are furnished apartments then?

Mauricio: Yeah, it's everything. It's pretty much like apartment for just two people in each room.

DePue: Are couples coming up or the individuals, generally?

Mauricio: No, it's coming.... Like if we say, "We need twenty," they will come in a group of twenty.

DePue: But they're not necessarily married or anything like that to each other.

Mauricio: No, no. It's individual. But like right now, we're just supplying just for guys. And somebody, if some husband and wife come, okay, the husband allowed to work outside, and his wife's got to work inside in the packing.

DePue: So that happens, but it's not common?

Mauricio: Well, we started doing it this year, this is the first year we started doing it. So some we start with them. We don't know what we're supposed to be doing, so we're just like trying to—

DePue: Well, I understand you're an American citizen now.

Mauricio: Yeah.

DePue: When did you become a citizen?

Mauricio: It was in 2004. I had to become a citizen, and the reason I was because I had a couple of little grocery stores, and I had some restaurants, and when I start filling out the papers, I have be a citizen someplace to give the license for running the business, or—

DePue: So you have your own business on the side?

Mauricio: Yeah, I've got besides my own business.

DePue: Now where is that?

Mauricio: I have one right here in Belleville.

DePue: Belleville?

Mauricio: Yeah.

- DePue: And where do you live then?
- Mauricio: I live in Muscoutah.
- DePue: Okay. Your wife is obviously here. You have children?
- Mauricio: Yeah, we have three daughters and one little guy.
- DePue: Okay. How old are they?
- Mauricio: My oldest, she's fourteen. The second one, she's seven years old, and the third one, she's five, and the little one is one and a half.
- DePue: How many of these children were born in Mexico?
- Mauricio: Everyone was born right here.
- DePue: All of them were born—
- Mauricio: Yeah, all of them were.
- DePue: So they're all American citizens.
- Mauricio: Yeah.
- DePue: So tell me, are they more Americanized, or are they still holding on to some of the traditions of the Mexicans?
- Mauricio: No, I think pretty much mostly Americans. I guess really, because they don't eat the same like we would eat down there, it's just like, McDonald's.
(laughter)
- DePue: So what do you think about that?
- Mauricio: Well, I was thinking, when I was coming up here, when I bring my wife up here, I was thinking, well, let's just work here three years and we'll go back. Never happened. So now the girls just get bigger and bigger, the family now. My daughter, she's in high school this year. So I don't think I'm going to be back there.
- DePue: Do you get to go back to Mexico occasionally now?
- Mauricio: No, right now, not for some time. We have a chance, we can go down there, but right now, it's not, because we're trying to save for these kids, for the future.
- DePue: So what do you see your children doing in their future? What are their aspirations?

Mauricio: Well, my dream is that it's really better to finish the college, and after that, whatever she wanted. Say, "I want to take this," but that one is my dream. When I was down in Mexico, I was trying to go to school, but my dad didn't have enough to support me to go to school, so.

DePue: What is your daughter's name?

Mauricio: Brenda.

DePue: You said Aremis? Maybe I misunderstood you.

Mauricio: Brenda Mauricio.

DePue: Okay. Marissa?

Mauricio: Mauricio. Same last name.

DePue: Oh, okay. And you see some of your children are going on to college here then?

Mauricio: Well, we was talking about it all the time, I just keep talking to her, "If you want to have a better future, you need to pay more attention, go to the school. I don't have that opportunity. So if you want to be working, like we're working outside.. the heat. It's like she's coming up here sometimes, working part time, and I said, "Well, what do you think, to have a job here?" So always talking about now, the future, and how... I said, "Okay, but you never know."

DePue: What would you say is the best part about the experience you've had of working here at Eckerts, being a migrant worker at first and now being a manager here in the United States?

Mauricio: Boy, it was something. I never thought about it, I would be like a manager, because I don't have a lot of education. Right here, in this country, you don't have a lot of education, you can't do something. I never thought about being the manager, but I was working real hard, and trying to take care of the job the company wanted, and that's the way I went to the manager. So I have a lot of experience now, to how many peaches Chris wanted. The tree has like maybe 1,500 peaches for one tree. So Chris told me, "Hey Martin, we need this kind of bigger peaches." So my job is to, okay, if he wanted real nice quality, nice peaches, so I had to leave like 350 in the tree, and the rest of them, I had to take them off.

DePue: Yeah, and he was explaining that process, and it's fascinating, the steps you do to basically make sure you don't have an over—

Mauricio: Yeah, and it looks like easy, but it's real hard to do. If you have new people, like the reason I'm trying to find more farmer people working—because before I'd have some people coming from the city, Mexico City, so those

guys, they don't know how to (inaudible) tree, because they never live in the trees, they're living in the city, so they don't have no experience how to use, cutting the one branch, so it's real hard for me. So these guys have done it, or at least they know how looks like the tree. I just worked with everyone, like I told them, "Well, this is the tree, you've got to do this," I'm going to have to show the paper, like fix one tree, and not cutting, you've got to do it this way, that way.

DePue: Do you oftentimes get the same people year after year to come back?

Mauricio: No, never.

DePue: Why not?

Mauricio: Well, like right now, we're thinking, I hope we have the same people. But the thing is, because when you're picking, like right now we're harvesting peaches; we got the number, you've got to hit that number. We're paying ten dollars, like Chris said, ten dollars per hour plus the basket. So we've got the limit number. It's not real high, that number. And depends, sometimes we have 100 degrees, and you can't go working fast, you can't go speed, because you'll tire. There's some time of the day where it's cool, breezy, so you can. I have some people I want. Because like right now, it's these guys, the one we're hiring right now, I keep looking, which one I like it. We've got to have some guys, they just, they don't want to listen, they don't want to do the right job, so it's just more hard for us. I'm expecting to, Okay, I'm not hiring this one next year. So everybody knows that, so it's like, when I get right here, I told them. You walk home, right here, the Eckerts, they have somebody, they don't want to them back right here, you close the door by yourself. Because we want everybody to...

DePue: And is this the kind of place where people want to come back to, though?

Mauricio: Yeah. Well, it's like, the way we're trying the guys, we don't push in to the guys, like, "You've got to do this," we just like normal, you know. So everybody knows, if you like to bag, you'll be fine, and if you're not, just ...

DePue: Okay. Anything about your experience here in the United States—you've been here a long time—that you found difficult, or really challenging for you?

Mauricio: Well, yeah, I remember at one time it was my speaking, writing down, that was the hard thing, I remember. I remember when I started trying to learn it, I was all the time watching TV, I don't listening to no music in Spanish, I would just listen to the radios; it's the way I learned it.

DePue: What's the language that's spoken at home then?

- Mauricio: Well, right now, we just Spanish and—pretty much we speak more English now, because the kids go to the school, so like my wife, she was speaking before a lot of Spanish. Now it's speaking more English, because the kids—
- DePue: Are the kids more fluent in English or in Spanish?
- Mauricio: No, they're doing both. They're doing both now. So it's like...
- DePue: Well, there's a tremendous advantage being able to speak both of those.
- Mauricio: Yeah.
- DePue: What's your opinion about current American policy, and this whole debate about immigration in the United States?
- Mauricio: Oh, like with immigration, the situation right now?
- DePue: Yeah.
- Mauricio: Well, I look at that thing pretty much every night. It's just too sad, you know. Like I'll look at the news sometimes, and like if they come up here, we're okay, but some places—the thing is, the bad thing for me sometimes, I think the good people, like some of them come to work and they have family, kids. (inaudible) was the only thing, I just feel bad. Some people don't like to work; you see some place, it's just—I don't take those back, anything...
- DePue: What changes would you like to see in immigration policy?
- Mauricio: Well, like these guys, you know, like give visas, some kind of opportunity to come to work and go back, and if it's possible, (inaudible).
- DePue: What do you think about this trend of tightening the borders up to stop the flow of illegal immigration?
- Mauricio: Well, a lot of people say, for people to cross over, maybe it's—it's a good thing now. So the other way, it's because a lot of people are dying in the desert, we're losing a lot of people down there, because they're crossing down there, and they don't have water or something, walking so many miles.
- DePue: So you're okay with the policies that are tightening up the borders.
- Mauricio: Yeah, because either way, probably like the President will have to find some different way to work out like these visas and stuff. So if they never do that, we're going to have the same problem. Like now, it's more easy to get a visa now for the people to come to work, and I think it will be working.
- DePue: And the example of that is these H2A visas?
- Mauricio: Yeah, it's the H2A visas, that's why they're—

- DePue: What would you like to see happen with all of the illegal immigrants that are already here?
- Mauricio: Well, like in my pays, these guys bring in H2 guys to work. I see some people working for maybe like ten years, and they have a lot of experience to do the job. These new ones, they don't know what to do.
- DePue: But they're otherwise illegal immigrants?
- Mauricio: Yeah, they... So it's right that it's probably have some kind of chance to get—like visa papers or something, if it's possible to do it.
- DePue: So you would like to see some policies that would allow them to become citizens then?
- Mauricio: Yeah.
- DePue: Okay. You've addressed this a little bit, but what's the hope that you have for your children, let's say twenty years from now?
- Mauricio: I can't understand what—
- DePue: What would you like to see your children doing twenty years from now?
- Mauricio: Oh. Well, by now, in twenty years, my dream is—and I'm just all the time, I talk to my kids, my wife, my roommates—work someplace that don't work where I work. My dream is like, get a different job, get more study, it's my dream. In twenty years maybe working somewhere else.
- DePue: A better life for your children?
- Mauricio: A better life, yeah.
- DePue: Are you happy with the life you've carved out for yourself here?
- Mauricio: Yeah, I'm really happy, because you know, the education that I have, I can't get more, like I want to. But I'm happy where I am. I can't ask more.
- DePue: Let's see, you got your citizenship in 2004. Are you going to be able to vote in this election?
- Mauricio: Yeah, I think I'm going to vote, because I guess I'm really happy; the reason I want to be citizen, there's so many reasons. I just fixed papers for my mom, too, she's like fifty-five years old. So she's right here now. So all my brothers right here, my sisters, they're all happy in the world.
- DePue: They've come here because you were here?
- Mauricio: Yeah, I'm the first one, I was coming up here.

- DePue: Is your mother working?
- Mauricio: No, she's not working. She's with the grandsons right now. (laughter)
- DePue: So is she living with you?
- Mauricio: No. She's living with my dad; she's at the apartment by herself, so.
- DePue: But it's pretty close.
- Mauricio: Yeah, we're close. She's five miles to.
- DePue: And how about your brothers? Are they—
- Mauricio: Yeah, they're living down there too. We're pretty much close.
- DePue: Are any of them working here?
- Mauricio: Yeah, I have one that's working here. And I have another one that is doing his own business, doing landscaping and all that kind of stuff. So everybody's doing different things.
- DePue: Okay. Any final comments that you'd like to make for us? (pause) Can you tell us a little bit about the businesses that you've got?
- Mauricio: Yeah, the business I have, well, the first time when I come up here, Chris is remembering where I am, where I was. Sometimes he's scared, he asked me pretty much every day, "Hey Martin, do you want to keep working with me? You're ready to go out?" Because I have a lot of experience and I help him a lot, with anything. So now he's like, "No, I want to keep working right here." Because I have my business, and the reason I have a business, it was like, want to save some money, so it was what I had to do now. So I opened a little grocery store, and now I opened a restaurant, and I have some people working down there. So I'm not down there, and I'm working my own job too right here.
- DePue: The businesses that you have, is that catering to some of the Mexicans that are in the area then?
- Mauricio: No, the restaurant is for pretty much American people. It's Mexican food, but it's like—
- DePue: Okay.
- Mauricio: Yeah.
- DePue: So your clients are primarily Americans looking for a good Mexican meal?
- Mauricio: Yeah. (laughter) Trying to...

DePue: And is it Americanized Mexican food, or is it the authentic stuff?

Mauricio: No, I think it's the real Mexican. It's stuff we make. Trying to, okay, let's fix this—we're trying new stuff, bringing too, like...

DePue: What's the specialty in the restaurant then?

Mauricio: Like *chile relleños*, stuff like that.

DePue: Do you make a good salsa?

Mauricio: Yeah, we make a good salsa. We don't sell a lot of salsa right now, because you know about the tomatoes and stuff. (laughter)

DePue: That was an unfortunate, since we found out it wasn't really tomatoes in the first place.

Mauricio: (laughter) I know. Yeah.

DePue: Okay. Any final things you'd like to say?

Mauricio: No. Thank you, you know, for your interview, and I'm real happy talking with you guys.

DePue: Well, it was very informative, and I want to thank you very much. We learned quite a bit in this. And again, thank you.

Mauricio: Thank you.

DePue: It's been a pleasure.

Mauricio: Thank you very much.

(End of interview)