

INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

This interview contains the life history of Eudoro Estrada, a recently naturalized American citizen from Mexico. Eudoro tells about life in Mexico, struggles as a Mexican migrant worker in America and starting his own business. Eudoro shares his nuclear family as well as his extended family experiences and briefly touches on the discrimination he has encountered as a successful Mexican businessman in America.

Eudoro Estrada operates a reforestation company that employs only Mexican migrant workers, providing the labor required to plant seedlings for large timber companies.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

EUDORO ESTRADA

of

Silvia Reforestation

P.O. Box 11228

Tacoma, Washington

566-8932

Vol 1991 # 13

INTERVIEW BY:

Deborah D. Boyd

May 3, 1991

AN INTERVIEW WITH EUDORO ESTRADA

Of Silvia Reforestation

I was born on July 2, 1933, on a ranch with the name of Buena Vistita, in the state of Michoacán, by the Pacific ocean. I live' on this rancho until I was 13 years old. Then I went to school, a private school. In three years I covered elementary school, in another three years, I covered high school. An' I was a truck driver on poor roads; in [going] 40 miles, we a spen' ten hours. And in 1958, I met my wife, or I got married, on June 18, '58. Then I went to a heavy equipment school to be a heavy equipment operator. An' I work a few years, then I went back to be a truck driver. I was the owner of these trucks. I used to buy merchandise, groceries in big cities and sell it to ranchers in small towns.

In 1963, I decided to come to United States for one year and since then, I'm here. I left my family, at that time it was my wife, my oldest son Abraham, Elvira and Silvia. Silvia was born about a month after I came, [after] I left my hometown. An' three years I was in the United States, an' I went back to my hometown, so when I met my daughter Silvia, she was three years old. In those years I was making about \$1.50 an hour. I was a gardener in Los Angeles. Then I decided to bring my family. They came in October '66. Then, I think in the same year, I start working lanascape, landscaping, with a construction guy. So, I work in a city there this company was building, the name is Westlake, in Los Angeles. Then I worked in

Magic Mountain, this place kind of a Disneyland. And then I have an automobile accident, when earthquake happened in '71, and I was one year disabled.

I had in that time a brother that was working in reforestation, here in the state of Washington. So, he asked me to come and work for him. So I work two years for him as a foreman, this was in '72, '73. Then in '74, he helped me start my own business and the first years the name of the company was just Eudoro Estrada, then I decided to change to Silvia Reforestation, because the name of one of my daughters was Silvia, and Silvia means, "a tree in the mountain". So that's almost 17 years [ago] that I started my business. And this reforestation, what I do is to plant trees and thin pre-commercial. So I work at Weyerhaeuser, Rayonier Timberlands Operating Company, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Natural Resources, The Campbell Group, Port Blakely and Champion International Corporation. Those are the major companies, and for private individuals, people who purchase a few acres.

Do you want to tell me how you do the reforestation, do you have your own acres that you plant seedlings in?

Well, all these companies provide the seedlings, I don't have to buy any seedlings, so I provide just the manpower,

Just the labor?

The labor, [yes] and some years, I have almost a hundred

workers. Most of them are from Mexico, or were from Mexico, or from El Salvador. Most of them are migrant workers. When I start my own business, was in Raymond, Washington, we live [there] four years and then we move to Hoquiam, where we live 12 years, then from Hoquiam, we moved to here, to Tacoma. About the Reforestation, [we] just go and plant trees where they log most of those areas and... Like I say, I just provide 'em with the workers and this companies provide the trees, the seedlings.

Do you have any trouble getting workers, do you have a network of workers, or do you run ads?

Sometimes, in the past I have to go like to California to get workers, to put an ad on the radio or the newspaper, but now there's many people around that I use, subcontractors. I use five subcontractors to hire my job.

So, then they find people for you?

[Daughter Rosa comments that it is important to note that her father has helped others to start their own business subcontracting.]

Yes. Right now it's just my daughter, the only employee that I have. The rest, all the jobs that I do is using subcontractors and other contractors are people that I helped to be contractors themselves.

In your advertising or subcontracting, do you get any illegal immigrants?

Yes, sometimes, they come, all kind of workers; some of them, they don't have papers. Now it's illegal to give jobs to those guys. So they has to provide not just work permit,

they have to show an i.d., that [the] work permit belongs to that particular person. So, it's sometimes hard to identify people who aren't legally in the United States, but in order to fill that form they call I-9, that anybody who'll get them a job, even people from here. They has to fill that I-9², in the first two days. The employee and employer has to fill these out or the immigration can fine us or any employer.

Is there any way as an employer that you can help the illegals to get legal status?

No, at this time it's hard after the amnesty, they has to be married, to marry a citizen, American citizen, and then it takes probably like two years to be legally here. But there's no way, except professionals-- actors, attorneys-- they can fix the permanent visa, but it takes years. So right now it's hard to get to stay in the United States.

You said that you came for a year to the United States, first, and then decided not to go back?

Yes, I decided not to go back because I was working okay then when I came, I came with a tourist passport and I was two years that way, and then one year I was without anything, and the third year I fix my permanent residence, then is when I brought my family. I had four childrens, the oldest Abraham, and Elvira, Silvia and Rosa, the youngest. She was born here in the United States in '67, and now she's my assistant in my business.

Have you become a naturalized citizen?

Yes, anybody that has a permanent resident after five years, can become an American citizen, but we don't have to. That's something we want, and I became a citizen in '88, just recently.

How many people do you employ?

Around one hundred. There are probably... During the tree planting season from December to April or May, there are about one hundred people who depend on me, normally. There's the subcontractors, there are five or six, and all the employees that they have, so altogether there's about one hundred... [By] hiring a subcontractor, I can present a better job... I think they present a better job, if they are the owner of that particular crew, and if they are the employer. So that's why I decided to do this, and I started helping, three or four years ago hiring [sub]contractors because I want to help these guys. They don't necessarily have to work for me, but they want, and [then] they be able to work by themselves for companies. There are right now five contractors that don't work for me, they are working for another companies, because they learned everything and they are doing a good job, some of them. They don't have to stay all the time working for me. That's a subcontractor.

So, for example, Weyerhaeuser would call you and say we need so many acres reforested?

Yes, like Weyerhaeuser would say I need two or three planting crews and then I send these guys and these other com-

pany, they do the same. For some of them, I have to bid for the job, but most of them, Weyerhaeuser, the Campbell Group, Rayonier, I don't have to bid, they will [pay] the price and I will come for the job. So they ask me how many crews they need, every year, and after we plant, we finish with the planting and then we start thinning, pre-commercial thinning. When there are too many trees, we cut some of them. They're not commercial, we cut it and leave there and most of the spaces just leave there like 12 feet by 20 apart, [between] those trees, and they are like ten years old to 25 years. And we cut some of them. Most of them were a natural seeded [tree] or some places this company threw seed. There are many and we have to cut some because when we plant, we are supposed to plant in the right spaces. Then they don't, has to go back and cut some of those trees. Sometimes in the past, like Weyerhaeuser, they were planting like seven feet by seven feet. Then later they found out it was too close, so now some those plantations, we are cutting some in order to leave like three hundred trees an acre. Before it was like seven hundred.

Do you run into discrimination in your job?

I don't know really, but in Raymond, they treat us very well. Policemen and everybody. In Aberdeen, it was different. The Aberdeen policemen, they don't like Mexicans, they don't like the El Salvador. I haven't any problems with the policemen but, the policemen are thinking I brought those guys, everybody from Mexico or from El Salvador, and I didn't bring

anybody except my family. And there are many people ..., The policemen are thinking that works for me. There are people who work for other contractors, and other contractors, they don't have nothing to do with me and my job. Contractors that lives in another places, but they have jobs and with these companies in Aberdeen but not with me. But we are having this problem with the policemen. Hoquiam police are different. We didn't have much problem but Aberdeen.

[Although]even my English is bad, I don't think I have any problem with them [many companies] bacause to me Mexican, and the guys from El Salvador, they are hard workers. I try before to have an American crew, but they don't really want to work, and I don't blame them, this is a hard job. And from here, they are from here, and really they want to do something, and to be somebody. They can get a better job than this one, so I never have a good crew, just a few guys. But some of them, they didn't even want to work one day, just ten minutes, half an hour, and then they leave. But a Mexican and people from El Salvador are hard workers, but like I say in Aberdeen, really they don't like us.

When they are out on the job, do your men work around other people?

No, the crews separate.

So you don't have to worry about how they are treated?

No.

How about in this area?

We are just new here, but I have one crew working for Champion, by Puyallup or Enumclaw and I have (speaks in Spanish...)

I think this company, they really like Spanish speaking, not just Mexican, but this other guy from El Salvador, like I say are hard workers too. And this company, they really like them, they work even in bad weather.

(Daughter Rosa comments)

Tell me about your family before. Your childhood family.

Oh, I grew up in this ranch where I told you, and very poor. I remember when my father had a horse, a cow and a donkey. But they were working, my mother and my father. My mother was working for, with another man, helping my father in anything. This place where I grew up is dry, this hills that are not flat and they cannot irrigate this ground, so only during the rainy season we could have corn and beans. But, my father [and] like I say, my mother [were] farm workers, and they worked together. My father was a buying cows, young cows, and selling the next year, and keep them for a year...

He succeed, he bought a big ranch, I don't know how many thousand acres. Maybe 20,000 or more. Very big and then we, they move, and I went to school, like I say, when I was 13 years old, far away from them, in the next town.³ I went this city, three hours by horseback, and it was hard for me, for my brother, because another two of my brothers went to that school at the same time. We were on the campus, and we go out only on weekends, and we cannot go to the plaza, only once a year, so

we were really like a monk [or] to be a priest or worse and then my father moved to Arteaga, when I was already 20 years old. He bought a house in Arteaga, and bought a farm near Arteaga, and sold his big ranch, he sold it.

We were eleven brothers and sisters. Five of them died, so then we were four brothers and two sisters; and one of my sisters lives with my parents, and I have a brother in Mexico. He is an attorney, a lawyer, he was a federal legislator for years, and all the time he is working for the federal government, now he has a good position. Years, he was the second person in Mexico, of whole country. In Mexico, when someone has a lot of land and they don't use it, the Mexican government of the federal government divide the land for the people who lives in the country. So my brother was the second person, he was the one who was deciding if the land can be divided for the people in that country. Now he has a federal position, he has two airplanes, with his servants and they live in a nice house where the federal government is. Other guys and many people who know us, him and us they asks me why I am here in the United States. I am here because I like it, and I succeed in this business, and I am able to send my children to school, PLU⁴ is where my three daughters graduate from, PLU. So back to Mexico, (Eudoro shakes his head). We now have a grandson and we want to be close.

So there's no plans on retiring to Mexico?

No. Is better to stay here, (laugh). Is a lot of bad

things down there, that are not here.

Is there more repression from the government down there?

No, to me it's like more freedom, that is, sometimes. In some places, like my hometown, is kind of dangerous, even to go out at night. When I was a truck driver, living down there, I could sleep any place in the mountains, anywhere. Now is different, because there's a lot of marijuana, and a lot of drugs. Not just marijuana, but a lot of robberies, a lot of people who steal money or ask for money, for nothing they kill. Sometimes I get scared for my family because it's not like before when I, when we were down there. That's why sometimes I think to go back. But we still have land down there, like 1200 acres, and some cows. My father takes care of these, and the land, the cows, and it's like dry country, dry land, not really good land. So when I think to go back to Mexico, now it comes to my mind what can happen down there and then I say no, I'll stay here.

But, I still miss it here because of the weather. Like at night, we cannot go to downtown about 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock. It's like immoral. Nobody, you cannot see anybody. In my hometown, you go 8 - 9 o'clock at night, lot people on the street in the plaza, talking, eating peanuts, and so it's more happening. The people are happy down there. Friendly, even if they are bad, some there are, but it doesn't mean everybody. So you'll find really nice people down there, friendly people, and it's not like here. You have a friend and sometime you see this friend and you're in a hurry, you say "hi",

and you continue walking by. Down there, you have time to talk and sit down and it's no hurried or anything, it's an easy life. But in another way it's hard, you cannot go to another town at night, because you don't know if this guy's gonna stop you. They put rocks in the highway, you have to stop, and then they ask for money. But in the city, in this town, I'm talking about this region..., it's nice, more happenings than here sometimes.

So does your father still live on...?

Yeah, my father, he is about 85 years old. My mother is about 88, still alive. My father was a mayor in my hometown, and also was a judge, [justice] of the peace, for years. My father is a popular man. Many people go to ask for advice, to ask for recommendation for my brother. And my brother is how, like I say, all the time has been in a nice position of power. Many people everyday, people go to my father asking for some help, advice, or recommendation from my brother. So when we go, it's because we have a lot of friends, relatives. We are really happy much because we have parents, a lot of friends and relatives, it's nice.

Do you go home to visit?

Yes. Last year I went, it was in December and [again] probably in June or July.

Do you go a couple of times a year?

Yes, sometimes, for one reason or another, I don't go,

but most of the years, I go a couple times a year, at least once.

Do you have any idea what you would have done if you hadn't come to the United States?

Probably, if I didn't come, I don't know what happened, because in my hometown, after, I don't know, many years after I left my hometown, they were just drugs. Once, when I asked my father, "who are, who is involved in drugs?", he told me, "asked me, who is not involved in drugs?". You can see from the highway, because of the border. Doesn't say much, that town. It was poor town, poor houses. Now you can see nice houses, and all of them, all those houses, they had garage. Some houses here don't have garages or one car garages, those houses, all of them, is garage, worth a lot of money. Real estate was a higher than Mexico City, 'cause, anybody can give anything you ask for a house or for land, because they make money very easy. Now, it's harder, the government is hard on these guys, many were killed by soldiers, another one, in jail, and a lot, they kill each other. Now that the government is hard on them, they cannot even label that they were working for these guys who were harvesting marijuana. They were getting a lot of money just to work as laborers, now they don't want to work just for nothing, and they prefer to steal then to work sometimes, not everybody, but there's a a lot of that. That's why it dangerous and there's a lot of guys [that] are robbing, stop cars on the highway, because they cannot make money like before and now they are lazy, they

don't want to work hard.

But in this city, it's kind of nice, the houses, those guys have a lot of money to spend on a house, the only bad ugly houses is my father's. Even when he was a mayor, he didn't do what in Mexico [is] common, that all the mayors, or anybody who is work for government, they make money one way or another. So illegally or whatever. I think my father never did anything wrong, that's why he is still there in that old house. And if I didn't come, to the United States, I don't think that I can grow marijuana, but it's what everybody is doing down there, but I don't do it for a lot of reasons. Really, I'm afraid to have problems, plus my father sure he didn't permit me and my brother, because he had this good jobs, and I don't know really what kept me. Probably when I left my hometown, I have a good credit. I can have a grocery store. I was just selling wholesale without having, myself, a grocery store, and that's a good business. But, I don't know really what can happen, I never worked for anybody down there, except when I was for a few months an operator[for]a company. We was building a dam and then I started my own business, a small truck, because like I told you it was poor roads, dirt roads, and during the rainy season, there were no roads sometimes. Some[thing-would have] happened if I didn't come to United States. I'm happy to be here.

[Thinking back to when you came to the United States, did you have any trouble getting a visa to come here?

No, in those years if we got a employment letter from any employer, we can have a permanent resident. Now, yes, the immigration laws changed. Now, it's hard, like I told you, now you has too many in America. When I fixed my papers, I was able to have my family.

Was there anything you had to do with the government, in order to get permission to move out?

No, the Mexican government, there is no problem, the problem is here. The United States doesn't want a lot of people from other countries. The problem is here, not Mexico.]⁵

What was it like in Los Angeles when you were working as a gardener?

It wasn't hard for me because I have a brother who was another contractor who was here and a cousin. So when I came, I came and stayed with them and my cousin was working in a place, one house, as a gardener every day. This house belongs to a guy who owns Imperial Oil Company. He has wells, oil wells, in Texas, and it's a big estate, 18 acres, and every day we were four guys there. And when I came, my cousin, he was already in that place working, and he got that job for me and I worked about two, three years. And then [they] fixed [my] papers and I joined the construction union, and I started working, making good money, and I started landscaping in this Westlake. They build these cities, big cities, and then Magic Mountain. So it was good, it was nice.

[When I was a gardener, when I make \$1.50 an hour,

two years, later, I think I make \$1.70 an hour. But, then, when I started working in landscape, and I think it was like \$5 or \$6. But it was good, it was the best jobs we could have, construction union, and landscape. We have to in those years, we have to have construction union. We have benefits and even to me, was a good salary.]⁶

I was making good money until I had this accident, but even before I have this accident, I didn't think to buy a house. I was making good money, but it wasn't enough to buy. I never thought to buy a house, because I didn't want to be tied here and I then when [I] want to go back to Mexico, I have to sell the house. But most[ly] because I didn't have enough money.

But when I move over here, after I start my business, in '74, the first year, it was really good for me, because I had like 80 workers. Right away, I was famous. When I was a foreman for my brother, this company, Weyerhaeuser, was saying that I was the best foreman that they saw so far in those years. In those years, we has to put \$20,000 down to be a contractor. When I start my business, I told them I could not put any money. They said, "no, that's okay, we know you". And we were living in Raymond, and I was working for my brother in Chehalis. So Weyerhaeuser in Chehalis, want me to work only in Chehalis. I learned in Chehalis, and in Raymond, they wants me to work only in Raymond, because I was living in Raymond. And this one[person] came to Federal Way, to the main office, Weyerhaeuser['s] main office, and these guys in Tacoma, from Federal Way, told these guys from Chehalis and Raymond

that nobody owns a contractor and I can work any place I want. So I work in both at the same time and I make it okay, and since then I am working for Weyerhaeuser and then, for Rayonier, the same years for both companies. I did good man, in those years before 1980. And then came these hard years for the timber industry and still now it's a little better. Those are the years I never want to come back... This company would pay better and there was not competition as now, but still the contractors are still there. I think I gonna be here as long as I want.

So which years were slow?

After [19]80, then it was bad for the timber companies. Five years, in those five years, some company[would] just plant, and they didn't [do] thinning because they didn't want to spend money. They didn't sell logs like before, so it was really hard. I think it was not just here, it was all over the world. That's why they didn't buy logs in other countries.

So do you think it's going to get any slower now, or any better?

It's gonna be bad for this small towns... Now they want to protect the spotted owl. It's gonna be bad like Forks, it's a small town. Anyway, 2,500, a couple thousand people. And it's gonna affect me, but not too much because I don't work for the Forest Service too much.

The first year that I worked, I didn't have money to buy a house. My brother found me \$3,000, down payment for a house, and I pay a year and a half, it cost \$15,000. It wasn't much, but in '74, it was a little bit more. And then in '78, we moved to Hoquiam and this house I pay \$88,100, and I was able to buy a new car for my children, except Rosa did not want a new one, she want one of those sports cars, one of that Camero.

[Daughter Rosa comments that her father's goal was to purchase a new car for each child on their 16th birthday, proving to neighbors that Mexicans can do good!].

And some of the neighbors suspicion of where money came from, call the fire department and saying that I have gas and I was living in the city and not allowed to have gas drums and barrels of gasoline in the city limits. So one day, one of the fire department, came to my daughters, kind of mad, saying I had gas and it was oil, not gas and some, because they were jealous. In Hoquiam, some people were jealous of Mexican, an ugly Mexican was making some money, (laughs).

We moved up here because - I don't know why, but my oldest daughter chose PLU to go to school. And then Silvia, and then Rosa, and when they got married, before I didn't think that anybody could be a nice man to be my son-in-law, but these three guys are really nice. They met them in PLU, and they are really nice guys. And then we moved in order to be close to them. But, my main job is in Aberdeen. Before in the past, I was working all over, even in Oregon and here, now don't

work too far. So the main reason to move up here is to be closeto them, and now, I'm very happy that Rosa works for me, not just because it's my daughter, but she does a great job for me. I counted on her, because she's my daughter. I don't say that nobody else is any honest person, but I know I'm confident in her because she is my daughter. So, I'm really pleased having her here to work for me.

We touched on discrimination, when you worked in Hoquiam, but you brought it up again. How long did you live there, and what other kinds of things did you encounter?

In Hoquiam, 12 years and not, not really.

Was that one incident with the neighbors, the only problem that you had?

Yes, and then, this guy found out, they were wrong about gas, and I didn't have much really that much problems.

(Daughter Rosa comments that they had many friends).

Yes, they were popular girls. Rosa was a cheerleader, and Silvia was a cheerleader and everyone knows them, even now, "Oh I know Silvia and Rosa, I know them." But then we sold that house. So I rented an apartment. We got the same telephone number. I want to ask if I can rent this apartment. I found out this lady, the owner knows them, and it was really nice. This lady owns a motel. Many people I don't know, and really it's not very much discrimination to me. I don't know what bothers me more is the way the policemen treat us. In

Raymond, I think we were the first Mexicans to live in Raymond, and policemen were really nice. And I don't know why in Aberdeen; I know there are some Mexicans, and some from El Salvador, they are say, troublemakers. I don't say, they are young guys and they no families, it's just young guys, and because we are from another country, anybody sees bad. But to me, there are more Americans bad, then us, but they don't say much about them. They just say about us, why are we here? Even here, the police are the one that says, "why are we here?", and we has to go back. They haven't never talk to me that way, but I hear it from when they catch somebody, ask why they, "why are you here?" When they talk to me they are nice and polite, but I know they don't like us. And is different in Hoquiam. Even the policemen in Hoquiam, they don't talk like the policemen in Aberdeen.

I hope they change now because of what happened in Los Angeles⁷, and not just because they have the power, and can do anything they want. I hope they change. But, still, they don't say much, I know they really don't like us to speak-- they don't really like me in the nice trucks, cars, and I don't know what they are thinking they know. People know at least from this company how much I work, not just at 5 o'clock, or 10 o'clock at night, anytime. Like I told you, after we finish, [I'm] gonna go there because tomorrow I has to look for some jobs, cleaning areas. That I have to go by myself, look them, by myself. And even Sundays I work, and some people they don't know know much and it's just not me. When we were living down there, everybody was helping me here, they help me,

Rosa, but even here, they help me. Everybody works.

What does your son do?

My son helps with some things here and also he works too. And he's trying to go to college.

And your other two daughters?

My oldest daughter Elvira, works for a little town. She graduated from PLU in Business Administration, and she's a supervisor at her job. Silvia graduated from PLU in international trade, and also in anthropology. She works for a company, she is a president of that company. Three days after she got married, she has to go to Russia for a month. And recently, she went to Mexico to talk to my brother. My brother is help this company to buy fertilizer.

[Daughter Rosa comments that her sister Silvia is promoting international trade.]

And this company wants to sell that fertilizer to China. Rosa graduated from PLU, and works for me.

Do you have anything else you want to say?

No, if you have any questions, you can call.

I will, thank you.

ENDNOTES

¹Eudoro's wife's name is Rosa.

²An I-9 form is proof of legal authorization to work in the United States.

³Eudoro went to school in the city Arteaga.

⁴PLU is Pacific Lutheran University.

⁵This section has been moved from the latter part of the interview.-

⁶Ibid.

⁷Eudoro refers to the police brutality incident that occurred in Los Angeles, California on 3/3/91, where four policemen were videotaped beating Rodney King, a young black man.