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Interview no. 23

Woodrow W. Bean

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Woodrow W. Bean
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 9, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former member of the Texas Legislature and El Paso County Judge.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Post-war development of El Paso; work with sub-committee on higher education; political campaigns; role in the building of Thomason General Hospital, the Sun Bowl, Trans-Mountain Road, and the Cordova Bridge.

11 pages.

Woodrow W. Bean
August 9, 1968
Interviewed by Wilma Cleveland

B: My earliest recollections of El Paso start at about the age of five. At the time I lived on a ranch outside of El Paso and I remember the trips I used to make into El Paso with my mother from Esperanza, Texas, which was then in El Paso County. I remember that the streets weren't in very good shape and the most important building was the Mills Building. Bassett Towers was not here. The State National Bank Building was here, of course, and as I recall so was the El Paso National Bank and the old courthouse, which was replaced in the early part of 1960. I vividly recall that there were a lot of horses on the streets. This was around 1923 and '24. Strange as it may seem, El Paso was not a very modern town in those days.

However, after going off to school and graduating from the university, my best memories begin. It was in 1940 when I made the race for the state legislature. I ran against Ellis O. Mayfield and Marvin E. Whittington. I was 22 years old at the time and both of my opponents were young fellows, too. I won that race for the state legislature in 1940 after a run-off with Ellis O. Mayfield. I really became interested in the development of the community as a member of the state legislature. I was appointed on the appropriations committee and was made chairman of the sub-committee on higher education. That put me in very close contact with Dr. Dossie Wiggins, who was president of Texas College of Mines at the time. In 1940, which was just prior to the war, we were unable to do anything in the legislature during that 1941 session as far as facilities for building for

the college. As I recall, we did get the appropriations for an auditorium, but the war came along about that time and all the construction was cut down. Dr. Wiggins was a very energetic man who was very interested in building up the school and had a wonderful rapport with the legislature. I think that Dr. Wiggins would have been a very good politician if he had chosen that line instead of education.

In 1941, El Paso construction just about came to a halt and at the same time, the war broke out. I joined the Marine Corps and was gone for some four years. I returned here in 1946 after serving in the Marine Corps in the south Pacific and after having done some nine months of occupation duty on Japan. I went in the Marine Corps as a private and when I was placed on inactive duty in 1946, I was a captain. However, while I was still in Japan in 1946, I declared myself a candidate for the state legislature again. Before I got home from Japan, the people had elected me to the state legislature over two other opponents. I guess the reason that I did so well was that I wasn't here to mess things up.

In 1947, I was again on the appropriations committee. At that time we started a real development of the university. We got a good deal of funds, not only for extracurricular activities but also for a building fund, which had contributed a great deal to the growth of the college. At the same time, there was a great splurge in building here in El Paso. I well remember in northeast El Paso, where we used to go and hunt jackrabbits, that in a period of three, four, or five years that all that area going out by the Alamogordo highway on Dyer mushroomed into homes; and places where we had hunted jackrabbits just five years before that

completely took on terrific development. It was this time, 1947, that the experiment station located in the lower valley came about. It is now a branch of Texas A&M University. When I had just started working on this, the county donated some 200 odd acres there for an experimental farm, which was turned over to the college. Since that time a great experiments have been made that have aided the farmers in the development of cattle.

I think that 1947 was a real banner year for El Paso. There was a lot of development in the houses and modernizing the various industries, especially the refineries, that had been hampered by the war effort. I was most active in the state legislature in 1947 and 1948. I left out something from 1941. That year I was the author of the Big Bend National Park bill, which made possible it's creation. I threw that in because Big Bend is closely akin to El Paso, because all the tourists that go to Big Bend as a rule come on to El Paso. Through my efforts and the efforts of Senator H.L. Windfield of Fort Stockton we made possible an appropriation for one million dollars so we could complete the purchase of the other park area. Since then many people have visited the park and I imagine that in fifteen or twenty more years we will see the park as one of the most popular areas of recreation that the entire United States has.

At the end of the 1947 session, after what I thought was a very successful year in the legislature, Judge R.E. Thomason resigned from the United States Congress to accept a federal judgeship appointment. I immediately announced for Congress and after a very hard fought battle

with Ken Reagan of Midland, I went down in defeat by 150 votes. At that time, the congressional district extended from El Paso all the way to Midland, Texas and, of course, I was the El Paso candidate and Mr. Reagan was the Midland candidate. Although, I got 72 percent of the vote from the people of El Paso County, I didn't carry a very big percentage in the lower part of the district and was defeated. That was my first political defeat in 1947, by 150 votes. Again, in 1948, I made the race for Congress and was soundly thrashed by the incumbent, Mr. Reagan.

In 1948 and 1949, I engaged in ranching and farming and in 1949 I was again elected to the state legislature after the resignation of Mr. Bill Jameson, who was a lifetime resident of El Paso. Mr. Jameson resigned and I was elected without an opponent in 1949. In 1950, I served in the special session of the legislature and, lo and behold, on the 30th of July 1950, I was called back into the Marine Corps for active duty for service during the Korean War. Prior to 1950, before being recalled, I had made a race for county judge and was defeated by Judge Victor B. Gilbert by 700 or 800 votes. So I had been through three political defeats and it looked like I was washed up politically. However, after having been called back into the Marine Corps in 1950, I served with the Marines during the Korean Conflict until about 1951 and returned here in 1951. In 1953, after opening my law office in El Paso, I ran for the state legislature and was again defeated. So, it looked like I was really through with politics and would be a practicing attorney here, which I was enjoying very much and was very successful.

In 1954, I offered myself for county democratic chairman and was

elected, and I was elected again 1956 to the same office. In 1956, I was a delegate to the National Democratic Convention in Chicago and that convention nominated Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver for president and vice president. Our Texas delegation had supported John F. Kennedy for vice president and he was barely defeated. As a result of our strong support, I met the then Senator John Kennedy and his aide, Theodore Sorenson, and out of this a deep friendship developed. In October, 1956, we invited Senator Kennedy to come to El Paso and be our guest at a big democratic rally. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson was here plus Senator Chávez and Senator Anderson of New Mexico. And of course, Ted Sorenson, who later wrote that wonderful book on Kennedy, was here. We had a wonderful political democratic gathering here and I recall that Senator Kennedy said that it was the first time he had spoken publicly in Texas. I might add I am the only man in El Paso that ever escorted Kennedy and Sorenson on a real tour of Juárez. After the meeting that night, I mean, we went everywhere and we had a real good time.

After serving two terms as county democratic chairman, I announced for county judge in 1958. During my four years as county chairman we waged terrific fights between the conservative party, originally headed by Jim Hulse, and myself on the liberals, aided by now Federal Judge Ernest Guinn. I'll never forget that we had one county convention at the old courthouse in the 41st district courtroom which erupted into a free-for-all, with Mary Guinn, the wife of Judge Guinn, taking a notary seal and chasing Jim Hulse, who was the most dignified lawyer in town and the biggest corporation lawyer in town, under the council table. Naturally

during those four years we had terrific fights with the conservative element here in El Paso. As a member of the liberal wing of the democratic party, those were really exciting years, for the votes in the convention were so very, very close that it raised the blood pressure.

Being elected judge in 1958, I took office in 1959. I believe that in this period of time from the county's standpoint, we showed great gains. First of all, a bond issue I sponsored was passed which made possible the building of the Sun Bowl at the University of Texas at El Paso. I am very proud that my name is on the plaque up there. Those of you who come forty or fifty years from now see to it that my name stays there.

I believe the most important contribution as far as the building and construction of El Paso, materially, was my project which concerned the building of Thomason General Hospital. We had a terrific fight over the location of the hospital. First of all, I had proposed the hospital and the doctors wanted to move the hospital to a location which would be more convenient to them, near Providence Hospital or Hotel Dieu. However, Howard M. Polley, who was the editor of the Herald-Post and I believe the greatest editor that this town will ever see, sided with me on leaving the hospital where it was because the poor people that used it lived in that area. After a showdown meeting with the Medical Association, who I never got along with, never did and probably never will, I told them that the hospital was going to built there or there wasn't going to be any hospital built. The Medical Association caved in and we proceeded in building this beautiful \$9,000,000 hospital, which I don't believe has an equal as a general hospital in the whole United States. I know it didn't when it

was constructed. The hospital was named for my good friend Ewing Thomason, who at that time was sitting on the bench. I'll never forget when I told him that the Commissioner's court was going to name the hospital after him, that he said, "Why don't you wait until I'm dead, because I might do something that might embarrass you later on." Well, Thomason was in his seventies at the time and sitting as a federal judge. We overrode his feelings on the matter and the hospital was named R.E. Thomason General Hospital. As far as I am personally concerned, this is one of the greatest achievements this community has ever done. If you could have only seen the old hospital, it smelled like a butcher house. The doctors didn't like to go there, people didn't like to work there, and to think we had allowed a butcher shop to operate like that until 1959 simply because the medical profession didn't care enough to bring public pressure on the people to build the hospital. I think that hospital is one of the greatest accomplishments of my administration as county judge.

Another project that was my brain child and contributed greatly to El Paso was the opening of the Córdova Bridge. I took office in 1959. Then there were two bridges, one going south and one going north--the Stanton Street Bridge and the El Paso Street Bridge. They were both owned by an outfit out of Chicago that was a relic of the old Stone and Webster days. The only thing that they were interested in was that you paid your two cents if you went over on foot and 15 cents if you went by car, and they your three cents coming back. I immediately instigated a move to open up the Córdova Bridge, the Córdova island to a road. Before the

citizens of Juárez had built a bridge over the river leading on to the Córdova Island, which then was property of the Mexicans, and all we had to do was tear down the fence and build facilities there to make possible another thoroughfare into Juárez. There wasn't a thing at that time on the other side of the river, not the Pronaf, not anything was there. It was completely barren land. Modestly or immodestly, whatever the case may be, I claim credit for developing that part of Juárez into the beautiful area that it is today. And if you don't think I had problems opening that Córdova Bridge--it was really horrible. All the downtown business people wanted all that traffic to come straight to their doors. They didn't have the foresight to see that opening up that bridge would open up other areas of town, like Bassett Center and Northgate. The whole program on it was the vested interests of the traction company that did not want that bridge opened because it would divert that traffic. And how in the world they could have handled that traffic without opening that Córdova Bridge to Juárez, I'll never understand.

We opened this bridge on the 27th day of August, 1959. We had Senator Lyndon B. Johnson here to make the speech for the United States government. There were 30,000 people there for the dedication of the first Córdova Bridge. It was a gala occasion. The ambassador from Mexico and the ambassador to Mexico, Mr. Hill from New Hampshire, was here. We had the governors from all the Mexico states. I well remember Señor Borunda, who was the governor of Chihuahua. He and I became very good friends. It seemed like everyone was trying to stop the opening of the bridge. Mayor Ramón Telles was here at the time. He was not in favor of

the opening of the bridge. The mayor of Juárez was there. But really, no one will ever know the odds against opening that bridge. They called me from México City and told me that the bridge couldn't be opened, after I had already spent \$125,000 of the county's money on the bridge. Well, I was so downhearted about it. There was nothing I could do about it except make a skating rink out of it. I took off for California for a vacation. In July, I got a call from Senator Johnson's office saying that the Mexican side would be ready to open on the 27th of August. That was on Lyndon Johnson's birthday, and my birthday was on the 28th of August, and we had a joint celebration on the 27th.

Another big accomplishment during my administration which I am very proud of was the construction of the Trans-mountain Road. I appropriated \$65,000 of the county's money for a survey. The people thought I was out of my mind. However, when the survey had been completed, we took it to Austin to the State Highway Department. The proposal came back that we not only put a road from the Canutillo road over the mountain to Dyer but they suggested that we continue it over to the Fort Bliss reservation past Montana Street over to the Carlsbad highway. The Highway Department said that this was the deepest cut they had ever made. It was 150 feet right from the top of the mountain. I have to admit that I am very proud of being a part of all these things: the Sun Bowl, the hospital, the Córdova Bridge, etc.

I have retired from active politics in 1962 when I ran unsuccessfully for Congressman-at-large. I ran all over Texas. There were seven opponents. In the primary, I led by 119,000 votes. But in the elections, Joe Poole

of Dallas beat me by about 69,000 votes. So looking back over my political career from 1942 to 1968, it was very rewarding and there are material evidences of my being in office. I think I have made a contribution to the development of El Paso and the liberal democrats. Back when all this started, I was so liberal that everyone thought I was a member of the Communist Party. That was a bunch of hogwash. It was very popular in those days to believe that anyone who was liberal or believed in labor unions was Communist. I know that I lost some elections over this but it was worth it to me. I think that over a period of time I will be found right. I am very proud that I was a liberal and that I voted as a liberal in every political office I've held. I feel that it has contributed greatly to this community and to the less fortunate people. There is still a lot of work left for those who come later in life, to help those who are less fortunate than we are.

Following my retirement from active politics, I began to practice law here. El Paso has been very good to me and I look forward to a great deal of growth in the future. There is one thing I would like to mention and that is the democratic meeting we had here in El Paso this summer of 1968. It was a county democratic convention and I acted as floor leader for Judge Colbert Coldwell. The liberals soundly thrashed the conservatives and Jim Hulse, my old political enemy, did me a great service by getting up and walking out. We then went to the state convention. The liberal group went which was headed by myself and Judge Coldwell and we were seated and the delegates were chosen as follows: Malcolm McGregor, Joe Yarborough, as delegates. George McAlmon, Colbert Coldwell and Tony Petry were selected as alternate delegates. I might add at this time that

the McCarthy people played a big hand in our victory in the county convention and Tony Petry was chosen a delegate alternate so that the McCarthy people would be represented. I was given a great honor, as I was elected presidential elector for the democratic party. So, come elections, December 16, 1967, I will be a member of the electoral college if the democratic party gets a plurality of the vote here in Texas. So you might say that I have made a re-entry into politics by being a presidential elector and being one of the 25 people who will cast the vote for the democratic candidate if he is successful in getting a plurality in the election in November.