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Interview no. 31

William Fink

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: William Fink
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 8, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 31
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former manager of mines in México.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Tells about his kidnapping by Pancho Villa; Villa's personality; impressions of the Tarahumara Indians.

8 pages.

Mr. William Fink

Interviewed by Wilma Cleveland

August 8, 1968

You mentioned getting into some sort of trouble during the Revolution?

I was kidnapped by a group of revolutionists and was riding through México with them. We were riding without an advance guard. I asked what would happen if we ran into Federals. Somebody handed me a rifle and *I* told them that I was just a spectator and that I had nothing to do with the Revolution. The first night we camped out in the mountains. We slept on the ground; all I had was a blanket. We ended up in a cave south of Chihuahua; it was a very large cave which had been used by goat herders. It was dirty and smelly, but we didn't mind because it was dry. When we got to camp, everyone was hungry. So, about a half dozen men were appointed to go out and find some cattle. In a little while we heard them come whooping and yelling and driving some cattle up the arroyo. It didn't take long before we had fresh meat. They lived off the country and liked it. They were mostly ranchers and cattlemen, so it was no trouble for them. Sometimes they had to live on very little rations so that particular night was a feast. There are some very large caves down there, large enough for a couple of hundred men and their horses to get into.

Was Billy the Kid ever down there?

I don't think so; they didn't need him because they had plenty of their own. Every morning when we rode out, it would be foggy and raining a lot. I could hear the trains whistling in the background. It was November. I was always worried what would happen if we ran into some Federal troops. But they weren't worried at all, they were enjoying themselves.

In the meantime, the men at the mine had sent word to Chihuahua asking for my release. They hemmed and hawed but two days later they sent the money out.

How much money were they asking for your release?

Twenty-five thousand pesos. It was delivered and everything was fine. The man who brought the money took me back.

Were you afraid when you were leaving that they might shoot you?

Yes, I didn't know what they were going to do; they didn't know themselves. We got along fine. They were apologetic and they told me they'd have some company for me soon. In the meantime they had sent a detachment over to Santo Domingo; that's the other mining camp. They had gathered up about six other American mine managers there. They had them over at our property at our mine, Galeana. When I got back, here were all these men at our camp. The general in Chihuahua had sent out Federals to run the revolutionists out, but he sent them out on foot and the revolutionists were on horseback, and of course, they couldn't catch anybody. Later on, when Villa was coming up, he always had horses and the train, too. He ran the train. He had a friend named Antonio Cabella Sier. He had a store and he was very strong with everybody. During the Revolution he was always with the winning side. He and Villa had been associates and Villa would give him supplies to sell that he had stolen. He did very well. Villa sent some of his men up there to get provisions and clothes for his men; Cabella, who was feeling pretty proud then, sent word back that there weren't any. Villa was furious. He had given him all the supplies. When I got back to my camp after being their prisoner, Villa was there in my office with Cabella and I never heard a dressing down like Villa gave that

man. He called him every kind of renegade there was. And the result of it was, Villa said to take him out and hang him. There was a tramway out in front of the office. I had to admire Cabella though; he was no coward. He went around and shook hands with everybody and said good-bye. Then he went to Villa and he said, "Mi general, adiós y muchas gracias por sus favores." Then they led him out and hanged him from the post. That was nothing for Villa; if he didn't like the looks of something or someone that was just too bad. His orders would be, "Take him out and shoot him," and that was all there was to it. A lot of the boys didn't understand Spanish and Villa turned to them and said, "That is what I ought to do to you." They didn't understand and they thought he said that that was what he was going to do. They were sure scared. Everything was friendly, though. That fellow was hanged and we were released.

Was this before or after Porfirio Díaz?

Porfirio Díaz was already gone.

When did this happen?

The Revolution started in November, 1910. This happened several years after the Revolution had started. It lasted a long time and we had to get along the best we could and we did. When I would see horsemen coming by our property, I would always wonder, "What do they want now?"

Did it hit you monetarily?

No, we got along; we were trying to live to keep the property going. It was not pleasant. All we could do was talk; and if we got into trouble, we took care of ourselves.

Can you imagine Villa hanging that man that way?

Why yes, it was nothing for him. That man thought he was safe because Villa was down farther south, but that did not make any difference to Villa. When he got ready to move, he moved! He just landed right there and that was it. Villa had his headquarters south of Chihuahua, off towards Parral. That was all ranchland there and Villa's men used to rest up there and feed their horses. Then the first thing they'd know he'd land someplace 75 miles from there and they'd ride it in one night. People would feel safe knowing that he was in another part of the country, and there he would be the next morning. They would never know. That is why he was so successful because of his surprise attack. I had a lot of admiration for the man. He was a man of action.

Was he an intelligent men, was he well-read?

No, he couldn't read or write. But, he didn't drink. He had a lot of drunken bums working for him, but he didn't drink. He always had a clear mind. He was very careful about his body. No American was very close to him. We met him and talked to him, and we were running a mine up there. He did do one thing, he never reneged on a promise he made and he always said that if you can do it, you can do it. He was honest. If he told you you could do something, you could and he wouldn't go back on his word. You could count on his word 100%. He had many admirable traits. Later on we were coming to Chihuahua after he had captured Juárez and had captured a coal train and unloaded it and loaded up his men. They went to Juárez. The first thing they did was to grab all the telegraph offices and the next thing everybody knew Villa had Juárez. They took the town over while everybody was still thinking about it.

One time in Jiménez, down south of Chihuahua, Villa felt like the people were trying to poison him and some of his men did get sick. So,

Villa went into this home of a Federal officer where the officer's wife and child were, he picked the baby up by the foot and shot it. Those were rough times. He thought everybody was against him. He was feared by everyone.

You had to talk to him every day? Weren't you afraid that someday he might be in a bad mood and change his mind about you?

Well, we hoped he wouldn't. We got to know some of his officers very well and if they knew he was in a bad mood, they'd tell us to keep away.

Were you married at the time?

Yes, I was married but my wife was up here.

Were there any women with Villa's men?

Yes, they brought their families, wives, and children with them. When they moved by train, they were all loaded in the box cars: men, women, children, dogs, everybody. They would rig up beds to sleep on under the train. When he was in Chihuahua, some men came to Villa from Batopilas. They told his officers that they had a mining camp that Villa could have and all he had to do was to go work that mine and he could have all the gold and silver he needed for his men. I was working for the San Antonio Company; somehow I got elected to go and look at it. So, I went out there. It was late November and it was snowing. We had to go out on the Parral-Durango Railroad to a lumber camp called Mesa Sandía. We got out there, just two of Villa's men and me. Villa gave me the finest passport anybody ever had. It was written by his secretary. It said to give me any help, protection, or anything I needed. I would flash that letter around to those fellows and they would move. This was right in the middle of a Tarahumara Indian village and there was a revelry going on when we

got there. They were having a rain dance. Most of them were drunk. It was wet and cold. When they have these celebrations, they have a big barrel of tesguino, it is a drink made of corn. They bury this corn in the corner of the house and the cook keeps it wet until the corn sprouts. It was strong, too. I had to taste it, but I didn't want to. When I got there, they were down at the bottom of the barrel. This dance had been going on all week. It lasted as long as the tesguino did. They were dancing and singing and playing these fiddles that they made. They were taught to make them by the first padres that came through there. They made them without any tools. The next morning we were supposed to look at this mine and I had seen enough to know that it wasn't anything. Well, it didn't have any gold. All it had was ore, just like all the other mines that everybody had. It was no good and I was wondering what I could tell Villa. Well, we rode back the three days to the railroad and then to Chihuahua. We got to Chihuahua about two o'clock in the morning. There were no lights because there was no power. I was walking down the middle of the street because it was too dangerous to walk on the sidewalks. A Chinaman came up and helped me with my bags. I had been there two days when Villa sent for me. I was taken to the Cortez General to talk to him. He asked me how my trip was. He asked me what I had found. I told him that I was very sorry but the mine was worthless. I told him not to waste his money on it.

Were you afraid he might not believe you?

Surely, I didn't know if he would believe me or not. But I had made up my mind to tell him the truth whether he believed me or not. That was the interesting thing, he grunted a couple of times and turned to his companion and said, "Didn't I tell you? We send a gringo and he tells me

the truth." Two days later he called in the two men who had told him this story about the mine and they were shot.

Do you think these people had seen the mine or had just heard about it?

They had been there, but they didn't know anything about mines. They were ranchers and someone had told them how good the mine was. I was sure glad to be home.

Did you come back to El Paso then?

No, I had to go back to Santa María.

Tell us about the Tarahumara Indians.

They had lived out in those mountains for centuries. They lived very simply. It's a country of high mountains and deep barrancas like the Barranca de Cobre. It is warm and there are orange trees growing. It is out in western Chihuahua. During the summer when it's cool and the rains start, they move up to the mesas and plant corn and beans. They might have a cow or two. Then when winter comes, they move back down to the barrancas where it's warm. They don't work for anybody, just for themselves. There are several thousands of them.

Why did you have to drink their liquor?

That is part of their religion. They have rain dances called dutuburi in the summer and they make this tesguino and then they dance and sing until the liquor is gone. Then they sober up. Their music is completely different from Mexican music. They just fiddle. They come to Chihuahua to beg. That is, they do now. They have their own language but they can speak enough Spanish to beg. They have to walk several hundred miles from their home. Most of the names of their villages end in "chi" that means "place".

What did you do after Pancho Villa let you go?

In the meantime, we had started this work out at Cusiuhiriachi. While we were down there, things started going bad for Villa. He had been in charge of all of México. He had been down in México City. He and Emilio Zapata, the revolutionist from the south, met in México City and sat side by side in the presidential seat. But that didn't work out very good. He was in charge of México City. Then they had a convention in Aguascalientes where they were going to decide who would be president. He was asked by a reporter if he would follow the rules of the convention and he said of course.

Did he take his own reporters and his own cameramen?

There were reporters from all over the country. In Chihuahua there were about a dozen war reporters. He said he would abide by the convention provided they take his hand. The convention was nothing but fighting, nobody got along. I can't remember what general they did appoint. But, both of them were, and they had the whole country in a turmoil because no one knew who was running it. Then they began to split up. Villa didn't like México City at all and he started moving north. Then Carona appeared on the scene. He was a president or general.