

7-25-1968

Interview no. 34

Modesto Gómez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Modesto Gomez (1895-)**
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 25, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 34
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Native El Pasoan, born in 1895; educated at Aoy and Alamo elementary schools; businessman; community and civic leader; longtime LULAC member; age--80.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Account of early 20th Century El Paso, including saloons, schools, and city buildings.

3 pages.

**See also No. 235

July 26, 1968, Wilma Cleveland in the home of Mr. Modesto Gómez

Were you born in El Paso, Mr. Gómez?

Yes, I was born and raised here. I will be 73 in November. When I was growing up El Paso was just a small village. It had one main street and a few little side streets. It didn't have any big buildings and most of the houses were adobe. The Hilton Hotel used to be the Sheldon when I was a little boy. The Sheldon burned down and then they built the Hilton. The Paso del Norte has been there for many years. There were many saloons and open gambling here. My father owned a saloon. This was around 1903. It was just a saloon for the immediate neighborhood. I don't ever remember seeing a girl in a saloon. There were a lot of notorious people here but I didn't know any of them. They were just old cowboys.

Were they dirty?

No, I don't think so. There were plenty of bath houses where they could go. It cost 25¢ to take a bath. A shave was 15¢ and a haircut was 25¢. I remember one man in the Coney Island saloon that someone said was a bad guy. He didn't look any different to me. I was just a child then. He was shot in that saloon; he had killed some people and a man came in and shot him in the back. I don't remember who they were. I believed the man doing the shooting was an officer of the law.

Did you have all the utilities?

We had electricity when I was a little boy; some people still had coal oil

lamps. We had water pumps in our back yards and then we got a water system also.

Were the roads paved?

No, they were dirt but some had brick in the roads. We had wooden sidewalks.

Did it rain very much then?

Well, it was like it is now except there were some floods. I remember when the river used to come up to 7th street. They called it the asequia then. It flooded over the canal. Juárez was very green then. There were flowers, fruits, and trees; more than was in El Paso.

Can you tell me about the schools?

I went to Alamo School when I was about seven. That's where I learned to speak English. We had about three hundred kids in that school. I learned to read and write. I went to Alamo about two years and I went to a convent. It was Our Lady of Mercy Sister's Convent. The reason I went to the convent was because I was a very mischievous little boy. My father said it was to keep me from going to jail or correction school; so he sent me there for one or two years. I came back a very good boy; those Sisters made me a good boy. My father didn't want to take chances so he sent me to Saint Edward's College in Austin, Texas. I went there in 1912. It was really a preparation to college. I stayed there until I had about an eighth or ninth grade education and then my father sent me to a military school here in El Paso. It used to be called the El Paso Military Institute, but it is no longer in existence.

Do you remember anybody that went there?

Oh, yes. I have quite a few friends who went there. Woolford Swanson was one of them, Joe Boyles also. The Institute was behind Fort Bliss and I used

to ride horseback everyday to school. I lived at home. There were boys from out of town who boarded at the school. It took about a half hour to ride the two miles to school. There weren't many cars. We saw one very seldom and when we did it was a novelty. They looked a lot like buggies. The doctors had cars and so did some of the richer people.

What did your father do then?

He had a grocery store and a saloon. When I went into the grocery business it was my own business not an extension of my father's.

Were you married then?

I was married when I started the business and had two children. Then we had another one. Now I have twelve grandchildren.

Is your wife Spanish?

Yes, she is. She was born in San Angelo, Texas. She is Spanish and German and I don't know what else.

And you, Mr. Gómez, what is your descent?

My father was born in Spain and my mother was born in Juárez. My father always wore a moustache.