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Clarence Harper

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Clarence Harper
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 17, 1968
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former city Alderman and County Clerk.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

El Paso politics after 1900; President McKinley's visit; early saloons and city buildings.

10 pages.

July 17, 1968. Wilma Cleveland in the home of Mr. Clarence Harper.

Are you a native El Pasoan?

No, I came to this area April 21, 1900. We first came to Clint; that's 21 miles east of here. My father had a contract to build some wells. I remember getting off the train and I saw my first adobe house. There were no brick houses and the only frame house was the station house of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The houses had dirt roofs with straw. I think there was one shingle house in the whole community. We lived in a six room adobe house in Clint. There were about 50 anglo families. We went to school with the Mexican-Americans. There was no segregation then. The mayor at that time was _____ and his wife was of Spanish descent. At that time El Paso County consisted of what is now Hudspeth County, Culberson County and El Paso County. It was the largest county in the state. In 1912 Culberson County was cut off, and Hudspeth County was cut off in 1917. We came from Uvalde when I was a small boy. My father had been a merchant during the panic of Cleveland's administration. The country all around Uvalde was for ranching and farming and they wanted to buy on credit and pay once a year. My father went broke so he and my uncle bought a gasoline well-drilling machine and he had some contracts to build some wells here, so we came. His machine was the only one here. He was drilling on the mesa. That was all cattle country long before we built Elephant Butte Dam. The valley had alfalfa, pears and grapes. The pears they shipped east and the grapes they made into wine. We got our well water from the river. The water company was privately owned by a man named Edward Watts. The people didn't drink the water, at least those that had enough money to buy the water that was shipped from Deming. It was transported by rail. The river was bigger then. When it snowed we had a flood. We either had too much water or not enough. The first

time I ever came to El Paso, my father brought us up here to see President and Mrs. McKinley. She shook hands with all the children; they were fine looking people. That was about four months before he was assassinated. He was killed in Buffalo.

My father died when I was very young. We moved to El Paso after that, my mother and my two sisters. When we got here there were five schools. Central School was the high school, Mesa School was the grammar school, then there was Franklin, Aoy, and Alamo. In 1902 they built a new high school. It was Morehead School. It was where Hotel Dieu is now. There were no paved streets. We were living on Magoffin Avenue then. There was a mule car that went up San Antonio Street and down Magoffin Street and that was the transportation. The first automobile I saw was in 1902 or 1903. It belonged to a man named Frank Bell. Magoffin, San Antonio, and Myrtle Avenues were the main residential areas. They had just begun to build up in Sunset Heights. Everybody who could afford it had a horse and buggy. I remember when my father brought us up to see President McKinley. It took us eight hours from Clint and now it takes about thirty minutes. We came on the train. The depot was on the corner of Main and Stanton, where the Southwest National Bank Building is now. There wasn't a Union depot. The T&P had a depot on the corner of Ochoa and 1st Streets. The Santa Fe was down on Santa Fe Street. I think there was about 15 or 16 thousand people here then. The Sheldon Hotel, where the Plaza Hotel is now, was probably the largest building in town. The Orndorff Hotel was where the Cortez is now. There were two banks. The State National with C. R. Morehead as president, Joseph Magoffin was vice president, and J. C. Lanckland was the cashier. Then the building was about 24 feet by 100 feet. The First National had J. S. Reynolds for president. I think it was at the corner of El Paso and San Antonio Streets. San Antonio Street at that time had a saloon or gambling house every other building. Gambling was wide open and there must have been twenty saloons between Kansas and El Paso Streets. The only stores I remember being there was a soft drink stand and a furniture store and a couple of jewelry stores. Where the Popular is now, the Masonic Lodge used to be. Where Lerner's is, there used to be a dry goods store. The rest were all saloons and gambling houses.

The Tenderloin district started at Overland Street down on South Mesa. I remember there was one lady down there whose husband ran a saloon. When they opened up the race track he had the Lobby Saloon where the Apache Trading Post is now. His name was Pete Adams and her name was Mae Stevens. One day that woman gave me two dollars and told me to take it to her husband in the basement there and have him bet it on a horse called Charlie Rothschild. So, I did. He said that that horse doesn't have a chance so he spent the money on drinks and that horse won at one hundred to one. That was the first and last time I ever saw her.

In the summer of 1903 I was a bellboy in the Sheldon Hotel and there was the Coney Island Saloon where the First National Bank is now. The Wigwam was where the State Theater is and the Parlor was on the alley of San Antonio Street. The Palace Saloon and the Acme Saloon were near where the Guarantee Shoe Store is. Most of them had a gambling part and they had gold and silver stacked up there. We would have to go there for change for the hotel and that's how we got to go in there. I never saw paper money then. The biggest one was called the Wigwam. Robert Campbell, a former mayor of El Paso owned the building where this saloon was. When I was a bellboy I'd take their grips to the rooms, take them ice water and drinks. I remember one occasion when all the politicians gathered there. There was a senator by the name of Charles Culberson. He was white-haired and moustached. He had a suite of rooms up there and the mayor and the county judge and all the county politicians went up there to see him. One man ordered drinks for everybody and when I asked him for the money he told me to charge it to the room. I wouldn't say who that was because he has some family living here now.

There was a man one time, from México. When he'd come there he'd have a whole floor. There was another one named Fernández or Hernández staying there. He rang the bell about 9:00 one night. I went up there and he had gold and silver stacked up on the dresser. He told me to go down and get him five gallons of whiskey. I asked him what in the world did he want with five gallons of whiskey and he told me he wanted to take a bath. I went down and told the clerk and he told me not to do it, if he wanted to take a bath for me to turn the water on for him. Anyway, he gave me a twenty-dollar gold piece for a tip. That was more money than I made in a month. They

only paid bellboys three dollars a week and meals. I was thirteen then. I was living with my mother. I had a sister four years older and one two years younger. We lived on the corner of El Paso and W. Yandell. My sister and I worked and my mother took in boarders. That's how we made out. It didn't cost much to live in those days. We paid \$25 a month for the house. That house is still there; it's about to fall down now, but it had two stories. I remember one young lady who came up from Clint to go to school and she boarded with us. There was a man and his wife who lived there too. That more than paid for the rent. It didn't cost five dollars a week for food. A man named Coffin owned the house. He owned the big pear orchard down in Clint. My grandmother's name was Coffin and he always called us his thirty-second cousins. I guess the Coffin's were all related. I have a seal of the first Coffin that came over. It was Christian Coffin and he came over in 1647 so I can always prove that I didn't come over on the Mayflower. When I was young I worked as a messenger boy for Western Union, a bellboy, a delivery boy for a grocery store. Then I went to work for the railroad as a messenger boy. From there I went to work as a night roundhouse clerk and day roundhouse clerk. I worked for a mining company. The sheriff was Florence Hall and he had some mining claims in Arizona and I agreed to buy some stock and go out there to work it. I worked it until we ran out of money and they closed it up. They never did open it up again to my knowledge. Then I came back here and that's when I got a job with the race track. I worked there until the Madera Revolution, then they closed the race track down. Then I worked for a cement company for three years. After that I went to work for George Huffman who was the county tax assessor. From the tax office, I became clerk of the district court of El Paso. In ten years I was director of the housing authority. Then I went into the real estate business. I was elected alderman in 1951 and I served four years and then I quit. I couldn't take it anymore. I worked in a grocery store right where KTSM is now; Mrs. Wayland ran the store. Her husband was a telegraph operator. They'd get a big barrel of sauerkraut and Mrs. A. Schwartz, who lived right next door, would come in and take the lid off the barrel and smell it and say, "It's not quite ripe yet." They owned the building where the store was and she bought her groceries there. She was a wonderful woman. They owned the Popular Dry

Goods Company. In the old days everybody knew everybody; now you don't know anybody. I was Judge Howe's clerk, he was the judge of the 34th District Court and I was the clerk of the district. Judge W. D. Howe and Judge P. R. Price and Judge B. Coldwell were all judges of the district. I was the clerk for eighteen years. Judge Howe was a very good lawyer. I remember one trial very well. I don't remember the man's name but they were trying the man in Judge Howe's court for murder. There was a man named Percy Howard indicted for murder in Ward County. He came up here on a change of venue. Two very prominent criminal lawyers were representing him, W. H. (Bill) Frye and J. B. Howey. Judge Ward's father, M. V. Ward and Dan Jackson and Charlie Vowell were representing the state. In a murder trial, jurors are selected differently. They are seated outside the court room and brought in one at a time. There was a man named Jones listening to the trial. I was taking something down there to the court room and a woman went in the double doors of the court room. About that time I heard a shot and when I got to the court room there wasn't a person in sight except a man holding his eye. The woman who had gone in there was his wife, Antoinette Jones. She shot him and hit him in the eye and they found the bullet in the jury box. The Judge, the clerk, and the baliff and all the lawyers got out of sight. That woman turned around and went for the elevator. Somebody called the sheriff's office and they got to her as she got out of the elevator. She thought he had been two-timing her. She shot his eye right out, he had it in his hand. That was 1932 or 1933. We tried that fellow two or three times. The first time they gave him the death sentence but it was reversed and they gave him life. I think we tried him three times. He killed a taxi driver in Ward County. The testimony was that they made this fellow dig his own grave and when he got it two or three feet deep they shot him. The other fellow with him turned state's evidence. He told us that they had robbed him and stolen his car and then shot him. That was during the oil boom in Ward County. I didn't listen too closely to the testimony because I had clerks who took everything down.

Do you remember any of the big fires in El Paso?

The Pierson Hotel was the first big fire. That was where the Times-Herald

is now. The Myar Opera House was on Overland Street or South El Paso and I was living near there and Colbert Coldwell was living on Santa Fe and Yandell. We went down there and it had rained and it was muddy. The opera house was destroyed and later the Sheldon Hotel in 1927 by fire. When the Sheldon burned a man named John T. Sullivan was the fire chief. The top three floors were shingled and that's where the fire broke out. They couldn't do anything about it. The wind was blowing badly. It had a good start before they got there. Another fire I remember was the Calisher Department Store. The Land Commissioner at the time was a man named J. T. Robison. He was there inspecting it and the Mesa Street side of the wall fell in on him and killed him. That was in 1910. That was the first time I ever heard of or saw R. E. McKee. He had just come out of México. He lived right down the street on the corner. He was a fine man. The people in Washington had faith in him during the last world war. He got a call from the secretary of defense to build Camp Bowie at Brownwood. It cost about 15 or 16 million dollars. He had things going in Hawaii, Panama, and all over. When he came here he wasn't a rich man. He came around 1910. He's six months older than I am. He built the Bassett Tower, the Plaza Hotel, Hotel Dieu, Providence Memorial Hospital, El Paso National Bank, the Statler Hotel in Los Angeles, the Statler Hotel in Dallas and the First National Bank in Dallas. He was a big contractor. He was one of the biggest in the country. I think he came from near Casa Grandes. He worked for the city for a while and then went into business for himself. He came from Missouri first, that's where his family was from.

Can you remember anything about that first time you saw him?

Well, there was so much excitement with the wall falling in. I was standing across the street and he was there too. I don't recall that I knew his name, but he later recalled the incident to me.

How did they get the fire out? With one bucket at a time?

They had mechanized fire trucks. When we first came here they had horse drawn fire trucks and the fire department was volunteer. The fire department

was down on the corner of Santa Fe and Overland Streets.

All the policemen we had were mounted police on horseback. They used to have police stationed at different places. The Rangers were stationed at Ysleta.

Did you know anybody in the Texas Rangers?

Yes, I knew Captain Gillett. When I met him he was Marshal. I knew a ranger named Davis. At that time I was working at the tax assessor's office.

I was going to the valley and somewhere down by Washington Park; he flagged me down and told me he wanted me to take him to Clint. He said there had been a raid down there. This was in 1919. I asked him if he was going to take anybody else. He told me they used just one ranger for one assignment. He was the cousin of Charlie Davis who was the mayor. There was a ranger that got shot in the Coney Island Saloon. That was a famous saloon owned by Tom Powers and Bill Truesdell. The saloon was down below and the gambling house was on the second floor. It was on Sheldon Alley.

Tell us about the elections of that time, were they honest or what?

I don't like to talk about that. In the old days they didn't have many honest elections. Judge Mulcahy, who has retired from the 41st Court, and myself helped break up the ring that controlled the politics. We were the only ones in the Court House who supported Judge Thomason when he beat Charlie Davis for mayor. The next year in 1928 they broke up the dishonest elections and it's been pretty honest ever since. I remember in the old days there was a man named Vincent Salvini. He was one of the war lords down in the ladies district. Maury Kemp, who was a lawyer here and a brother-in-law or Mrs. Howe, took me down to Salvini's to introduce me to him. I was having quite a race; they were trying to get rid of me. I don't think Salvini could read or write, but he ran a saloon. Maury told him that I was a clerk in the Court House and he should vote for me because I was a fine man. At that time James R. Harper (no relation to me) was Chief Justice of Civil Appeals. He had opposition at that time too. Salvini said, "Him cousin of

Jim the Harp? Shore I vote for 'em, an' hep 'em." Then he wanted us to have a drink with him. That must have been in March or April, the primary elections were in July. Salvini died about 30 days after that. He had a heart attack or something. When the elections were over, Judge Mulcahy, he was County Attorney and was running for that office. A fellow named Clark Wright was running against him. When the ballots were in they showed that Clark Wright won by about a hundred and fifteen votes. Mulcahy contested the election in the district where Salvini lived. It was done in Judge Howe's court, and he appointed me to tally the votes, to take them out of the box and call them off. They kept a tally of who voted and looking over the tally list I saw that Salvini had voted. He had been dead for two or three months. So, out of curiosity, I wanted to see how he had voted. They had his number on the tally sheet and sure enough he had voted against me and against Mulcahy. The fellow that marked all these ballots, had used a green pencil and what he would do was give the Mexicans a sample ballot. The first man would go in there with the sample ballot in the box and bring out the official ballot and give it to this fellow and he would mark it the way he wanted it and give it to another Mexican and he would take it in, ask the judge for a ballot and take the marked one from his pocket and put it in the box. Then he would bring out the unmarked ballot to this fellow. The Texas law says that it had to be marked with black ink or black pencil and this guy had marked them with green pencil. There were seventy-five or eighty votes that he had marked with this green pencil. Then with the recount Mulcahy was about four or five-hundred votes ahead. So, he became County Attorney. I didn't have to contest mine because I had won by six or seven-hundred votes. That's the way they voted in the old days.

Tell us about this ring you broke up.

Some of them would call the name out and no matter what the ballot said, they would call out the name of the fellow they wanted in. There were

three contesting the election at that time, and the three who were contesting won out. Every time they used that, it was the equivalent of losing two votes. He gained one and you lost one. That was in 1924. After the county election of 1928, I think all the elections have been pretty much on the square. The county seat used to be in Ysleta and they moved it to El Paso in 1881. They'd vote four or five times, each man would. There were more people in Ysleta than there was in El Paso but El Paso won out by a big majority. I wasn't here then, but I read the records in the Court House and that's how I know about that. I had charge of all the records in the District Clerk's Office. The records were in Spanish and English; they had to be, half the jury might speak English. In Las Cruces they had to do the same thing.

Did Billy the Kid or any of those kind of men speak Spanish?

Billy the Kid was killed long before I was born; I can't tell you anything about him.

How did you come to work in the Court House?

I had been working for the cement company. It was very dusty, we had to inhale that dust. George Huffman, who was the County Tax Assessor, was running for re-election and he came out there. I took him around there and introduced him to some of the boys. He thought it was a pretty dusty place, too. He told me that after the elections to come down and see him. My uncle was the father of Judge R. P. Langtry and he knew him very well. He took me down there, he told me that the only job they had was a copy job. At that time they made all the tax rolls by hand. They made three copies, one was the original and then they had the clerk's copy. He gave me a job copying tax rolls. That must have been in September. He had one man working for him that didn't show up for two or three weeks. He put me in that man's place and when he came back, he told him that he didn't need him anymore. So, that's how I got in the Court House. I went in with less salary than I was making at the cement company but it was clean work. I stayed there until July 5, 1921. There was a vacancy in

the district office; the county clerk had been indicted for malfeasance. So they appointed me and I stayed there until January 1, 1939. That's how I got into politics. I didn't want to be city alderman, but some businessmen called a bunch of us together down there. Fred Hervey ran for mayor. One of the newspaper editors looked at me and said he wanted me. I didn't want it. He said they were going to announce the ballot that night and they were short one man and I had to be it. The streetcars ran out here then -- all the way to Alabama and Richmond, I believe. Earlier the streetcar turned up Altura to Piedras Street, but when they opened up Manhattan Heights, they put a streetcar there. When we moved out there, there were only two houses between here and that Mexican settlement. Mrs. Newman's house was there on the corner and Mr. Maple's was on the other corner. Another house was here and there was a house behind us and that was all. We had electricity, gas, and telephone when I first came here. I can remember the first number we ever had; it was 849. There were several telephone operators. I worked down in the roundhouse as a call boy at night for three years. The roundhouse was for the railroad. I called the engine crews to take the trains out. I used to take a nap in the telephone booth. I made arrangements with the telephone operator to call me at 12:00, and she would ring the bell. I would send her a box of candy once in a while. That woman just died about six months ago; her name was McLain. El Paso didn't do any growing until 1950. From 1950 to 1960 it doubled in size. In 1940, we didn't have as big a population as we did in 1930. El Paso depends on Fort Bliss to a great extent. We didn't have many manufacturing plants. We had the smelter, the cement company, the packing house, the oil refineries. The copper refineries didn't come here until 1928.