

8-7-1975

Interview no. 171

Héctor Bencomo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Interview with Héctor Bencomo by Richard Estrada and Oscar J. Martínez, 1975, "Interview no. 171,"
Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Héctor Bencomo
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada and Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: El Paso Chicano History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 7, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 171
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 171
TRANSCRIBER: Rhonda Hartman
DATE TRANSCRIBED: September 9, 1975

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso businessman and former City Council member.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; El Paso and Los Angeles from the 1930's to the 1950's;
news media's role in politics; attitudes toward the Bicentennial.

3 hours.

68 pages.

BENCOMO

BICENTENNIAL

E: Mr. Bencomo, where were you born, sir?

B: Here in El Paso.

E: In what year, sir?

B: 1929, July 21st.

E: Could you tell me something about your parents, about their background?

B: Both of my parents came from México around 1912, 1913 I believe.

E: What did your father do?

B: At that time my uncle, the oldest, had a grocery store on South Stanton Street. My dad and some of his brothers came over and started working at the store.

E: Do you remember what part of México your dad came from?

B: Yes, my dad came from Matachic and my mother came from Parral.

E: Matachic is in Chihuahua?

B: Yes, in Chihuahua, right. It's a small ranch town.

E: What was the reason for their leaving México?

B: Well, at that time it was during the Pancho Villa days and somehow a lot of Mexican people from México came over to the States. My parents were some of the ones who came over from México at that time.

E: Did many of your parents' relatives emigrate from México at that time?

B: Yes, I would say that some at that time, and some a little before then. I guess the first ones came over right after 1906.

E: After 1906?

B: Yes, when they first started coming to the States.

E: Do you recall how many children there were in your father's family?

B: Yes, there were 17 in my father's family.

E: Seventeen children?

B: Yes.

E: Do you have any relatives--any uncles or aunts--still living in the El Paso area today?

B: In the El Paso area?

E: Yes, sir.

B: Oh yes, yes. Let's see. We have about five uncles and about three aunts living here in El Paso. There are still some living in México, some living in California.

E: How large was your family?

B: [There were] four boys and one girl.

E: Could you tell me something about your brothers and sister?

B: Well, yes. My sister has been teaching now for about 25, 27 years in El Paso. Two of my brothers are in the grocery business together with my father and myself, and another brother has a produce house here in El Paso, _____ Company. So we have all decided to stay here in El Paso. We like El Paso.

E: Could you tell me why you want to stay here in El Paso? Have you ever had any interest in going somewhere else?

B: Well, the only time that I really had an interest was after I left the Service. I felt that I still wanted to travel. I still wanted excitement and I wanted to even maybe get a job out of the country to keep on traveling. But, oh, after about a year or so I got married. After awhile we just go ahead; we do take

trips, we travel maybe once or twice a year. But it's always nice to get back to El Paso, [to] our friends, our relatives. Somehow this is where we really enjoy life--in El Paso.

E: Could you tell me something about your formative years--your elementary schooling and so forth?

B: Well, the first school that I attended was a Catholic school--San Ignatius School. Then after that, I think, the third grade we moved up a little bit further north, up to River Street. Then I went to Bailey School [and] I went to Morehead Grammar School. After that we went to El Paso High, one year at Cathedral and finally after the Service I graduated from a technical high school.

E: While you were going to elementary school do you remember precisely where you lived?

B: Yes. At that time we lived right at the 500 block--505 of East River Street.

E: Was this considered an area in which Mexican Americans lived generally?

B: No, not at that time. We were one of the few Mexican American families in that area. And it was a problem area. At that time we were not really welcome in that neighborhood and I remember feeling kind of out of place, quite a few arguments; and I'll go as far as to say quite a few fights we'd get into over the fact that we were Mexican Americans and _____ called Mexicans a few times.

E: Was the fact that you lived in that area of town attributable to the fact that your dad was a grocer and had a business and could afford that kind of house? Or what do you think was the reason for your living there?

B: Well, I think that is mostly true. Since my dad had and has been in business all his life we could afford to move to a little better neighborhood. At that time it was more or less a middle-class neighborhood and it seemed that the popular thing to do in those days was to move out of the poor neighborhood into a little better neighborhood.

E: As it is today.

B: It's still the same thing I would think, yes.

E: During your years in elementary school, do you recall any particular authority figures who may have had a particular positive or negative influence on you?

B: You mean Mexican-American?

E: It doesn't matter. Any teacher, for example.

B: Well, I'll first tell you about the negative side. In those days the fact that we did not speak good English, the fact that we did not know any English when we first started going to, let's say, Morehead and Bailey School there was a lot of resentment on the part of the teachers. I remember one time getting slapped because I was told something and I didn't understand and the teacher got angry. Somehow I started smiling--I didn't know what else to do--and she slapped me a couple times. I went home and told my parents. In those days it seemed to me like people, my people, Mexican American people were afraid to speak out and I was told that she was the teacher and I must have been doing something bad. So, that's kind of the story of my life right there. And on the positive side we did have some good teachers that were very understanding and in some cases did more than they should have as teachers to

try to help us understand. I'd say the first maybe four years of my grammar school life were pretty hard. Once I picked up the English language it wasn't quite as bad; it wasn't as obvious, but I think there was a lot of resentment towards the Mexican American children at that time in that neighborhood anyway, the schools that I went to.

E: This experience that you mentioned about being slapped--was it commonplace? Did you see other students experience the same thing? Other Mexican American students?

B: Well, Mexican American mostly and also Anglo. Plus other incidents that I would hear about--maybe relatives or maybe friends--where it happened in other schools. It seemed to me like it was a pretty common thing to either get slapped or get hit over the head or maybe paddled in high school. I remember that even though I don't recall ever having been paddled in high school, it was a common practice at that time.

E: You would say generally speaking that the teachers in the schools did not like for their students to speak Spanish?

B: Oh, that was one thing, yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. I remember that that had quite a mark on me. It will probably be there for the rest of my life--the fact that I could not speak the language that we spoke at home, I could not speak it at school. I just couldn't understand why it was wrong to speak Spanish in school. And to me it was kind of dumb. It was such a pretty language, the fact that after school most of our friends would speak Spanish, at home we'd speak Spanish and then we weren't allowed to speak it in school. It just didn't make any sense to

me. And I think that it probably hurts the student. It gives you a complex. You kind of grow up thinking that speaking Spanish is really a bad thing instead of something to be proud of. The fact that you spoke Spanish was kind of like a sin or something. It leaves quite a deep scar.

E: Where did you go to high school once again?

B: Well, the first high school that I went to was Cathedral High School one year, and then I went to El Paso High. And from El Paso High I went into the Service and then came back and graduated from a technical high school.

E: While you were going to Cathedral did you ever have any similar experiences with regard to the language problem?

B: No. By then I could speak fairly good English. I could certainly understand and I never had any trouble. I remember the brothers were real nice--they were very strict. And one thing, one reason that I didn't feel at home was the fact that we had a lot of students, most of the students were from some part of México and there was a lot of misunderstanding. We just didn't think alike. It was mostly rich people from México, I guess mostly from Juárez and I just didn't feel right. So that's when I started going to El Paso High.

E: What time period are we talking about?

B: That must have been around 1943, early '43 I imagine. I did go to summer school every year and if I had not gone into the Service I would have graduated I believe in January, 1946. I would have been 16 years old.

E: What was there about El Paso High School that attracted you in comparison, rather than going to Cathedral?

B: Well, the fact that most of my friends were going there. I think that had more to do with it. Certainly all of our neighbors and people that we knew in that area were going to El Paso High; and like I say, I just didn't seem to fit at Cathedral--the fact they mostly were Mexicans from México. There was a lot of difference in our thinking.

E: I'd like to ask you some questions about the social mores of the time--say, El Paso during the early '40s. Do you recall ever witnessing any use of marijuana during that time?

B: No, at that time we would hear about it and we would hear that marijuana was mostly used by the Mexican Americans, by the Chicanos. But it was mostly in the poor neighborhoods, around the east side of El Paso and around South El Paso. They were referred to as "marijuanos" and everybody would kind of look down. It was something that you didn't pay too much attention to. It was certainly not commonly used.

E: What about drugs, did you ever hear...?

B: No. No, not at all. I think my first experience was probably while in the Service. Well, thinking back, one time I think we were coming from China when we heard that one of the men aboard had been put in the brig for bringing back drugs. And to me, I just couldn't understand what reason he would have to bring back drugs. And then whenever we'd be tied up in a big city like around the Los Angeles area I remember hearing some of the guys mention the dances and things like that. But that's about it.

E: Do you think your time in Los Angeles was long enough to warrant a comparison between Los Angeles and El Paso with regard to this

subject?

B: Yes, I believe so. Even before I joined the Navy we had relatives in Los Angeles and I would go up there quite a few times. Then during my time in the Service that was my home port--in San Pedro and in Long Beach and San Diego. And since I had relatives, any time-off that I'd have I'd stay with them in Los Angeles. Since then we still go up there at least once or twice a year. I know Los Angeles pretty well--most of California I know pretty well.

E: Back in the '40s would you say there was more drug use in the Los Angeles area than there was in El Paso?

B: Yes. But still I think it was the same class of people more or less.

E: Lower class?

B: Yes. Marijuana was about the only thing that I would hear about then. I don't even remember anybody mentioning other drugs. Marijuana, I'll say, was a little bit more common in Los Angeles; and maybe even among the middle-class Chicanos it was used a little bit more than here in El Paso, at least to my knowledge.

E: Do you think that it would be fair to say that since the '40s the use of marijuana and other drugs has tended to be a fact in other social classes, in higher classes?

B: Oh, I know so. Yes, very much so.

E: OK. I'd like to ask you some questions with regard to dating that went on during those years. In El Paso do you recall much dating between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, specifically Anglo and Mexican?

B: No. Hardly any in the '40s. I think when things started changing were, in my opinion, when I first started seeing more of the dating between the Anglo and the Mexican Americans--I'd say was the early '60s or middle '60s, more or less. And now it's a very common thing which is good that children are now able to see each other, you know, as equals and not lower or any better than anybody else.

E: Can you reflect on your time in Los Angeles and make a comparison with regard to dating patterns over there?

B: Well, since you mention Los Angeles, yes, it was a lot more common to see a Mexican American with an Anglo. In fact, that was the first time that I dated, and I can remember maybe two or three Anglo girls. There it was just a lot more common and nobody was made fun of or anything like that. I remember now, thinking about it, something that I really enjoyed was that there didn't seem to be any discrimination--not as much, anyway. Like I say, it was very common. And then afterwards it was common to see Blacks and whites also down the street. Really, nobody would think anything about it.

E: Blacks and whites during the '40s?

B: No, I would say that was in the '50s.

E: Is there anything about Los Angeles, any particular reason that this was more prevalent than in El Paso? Do you have any thoughts on that?

B: Well, I guess just the fact that it's a much bigger city and people probably don't care what somebody else thinks; where here in El Paso in those days, in the '40s, I remember it seems like everybody knew everybody. You'd mention a last name and you'd all know who they

were talking about in most cases. Now we also have that problem here in El Paso that it's not like it used to be, that everybody would know everybody. And I would think that that was the reason why in Los Angeles things happened a lot sooner than they happened in a small city like El Paso. It seems like everything first starts in the bigger cities and then gets to the smaller cities.

E: Mr. Bencomo, what do you recall about the Pachucos in the '40s?

B: Well, at that time, oh, I imagine I was about 13 years old I guess when I first started hearing about the Pachucos. I personally like the long hair and I thought it was very neat. The trousers I used to admire. I used to like the way that they dressed. When I was about, oh, I think I was about 15 years old, there were about four of us that went up to Los Angeles. The first thing that we did when we got to Los Angeles, we bought what they referred to as a zoot suit. I think it was a 15 inch bottom or 14 inch or something like that. And we did it, I guess more to show that we wanted to identify with the Pachuco. My hair was not too long but I wanted to dress the part anyway. At that time they had just barely gotten over the zoot suit wars in Los Angeles. I felt a lot of resentment when I would hear people talk about the way that they had beat up Pachucos so we kind of would go into some neighborhoods dressed as Pachucos to see if anybody would make fun of us or want to fight or something. To me it was just really a war between Anglo and Chicano, Mexican Americans. And I think that the Mexican American wanted to identify with a certain way of dressing and wearing their hair a certain length.

E: Would it be excessive to say that this may have been a form of rebellion on the part of the Chicano against the Anglo?

- B: Oh yes, sure, very much so. Speaking for myself, I'd say that we knew that things were not the same for us as they were for the Anglo and I certainly felt proud of being a Mexican American, of being a Chicano. And that was my way of showing that I wanted to show everybody that I was a Mexican American, a Chicano. The word "Pachuco" to me was just something that I was proud of also because I could associate with El Paso and I was proud of being from El Paso.
- E: Of course, El Paso since the early 1900s was the principal population dispersion point of Mexican immigrants into the United States. When you visited Los Angeles or any area of California and you spoke of being from El Paso, what did people think about El Paso? What were their reactions? Do you remember any comments about El Paso back then?
- B: Yes. From all the Anglos, they would question whether there were any Anglos living in El Paso. Most of them used to think that El Paso was a home of just Mexican people.
- E: Nothing but Mexicans?
- B: No Anglos, yes. And when you would talk to Mexican people, most of the time they'd start telling you, "Well, my relatives or we came from El Paso." A lot of the people from the California area come from El Paso. So, that would make me feel real good at that time, very happy. It was just like running into relatives when we'd meet somebody from El Paso. The same thing when you'd meet somebody in the Service. The fact that you'd find out that they were Mexican Americans would give me a very happy feeling, and then [I'd] ask them where they were from. And certainly if they were from El Paso or from Los Angeles I'd feel very, very close to them; almost like brothers.

- E: During those years do you recall whether or not there was a lot of slang in Spanish among Chicanos in El Paso?
- B: Well, I guess since we were kids I remember there has always been slang, and there still is.
- E: Was it more prevalent then?
- B: Yes, I would think so. Among the Chicanos, yes.
- E: Is that because, perhaps, they didn't master English as well as they do now?
- B: Well, that plus the fact that we had a sense of humor since things were not too well as far as jobs. Things were not too well as far as the education system, the schools. This is the way that we could kind of be ourselves. We would have a certain way of dressing, we would have a certain way of speaking that nobody else would have and, I guess there again, we wanted to be identified with our own. And slang was just a very, very different language. I know my parents didn't speak [that way] and they probably couldn't understand us if they would hear us speak [that way], but to us it was very common and a very happy feeling to be able to speak [that way] to someone.
- E: Of course, you were a child during the Depression, but perhaps you may have heard your uncles or your parents talk about it. Is there anything that sticks out prominently in your mind that you've heard or that you've perhaps witnessed during the Depression with regard to Mexican Americans living here at that time?
- B: No, not that I experienced, that I remember. Things were a little tight at home. I remember we always had something to eat but maybe we used to eat more beans and hardly ever eat any meat, things like that. Flour and beans was a very common thing; they were very

cheap. I used to hear people talk about bread lines. I think there was WPA. I would also hear people talk about some of the banks taking advantage of people during the Depression--insurance companies going broke and people losing their investments, their policies; the same way with the banks--losing their savings. A lot of businesses [went] broke, including my uncle that had that grocery store.

E: Where was that located?

B: On Third and Stanton. It was a good sized grocery store for those times. They used to deliver first in a horse and buggy, and then the small truck. They would deliver all the way up to Sierra Blanca and Van Horn which I believe is about 120 miles from El Paso. Since they did a lot of business with the farmers, when the Depression hit they had a lot of credit and the people couldn't pay, so my uncle paid his debts off and closed up and moved to Los Angeles.

E: Were things better for him in Los Angeles?

B: Well, at least they were able to work. They first went to Fresno and did some fruit picking as a family.

E: This is after having owned a store in El Paso?

B: Yes, right. And then I believe after about 10 or 15 years he was able to open up a grocery store, a small one, in East Los Angeles which is still a Mexican American area. And that's where he has been; the family has stayed there in Los Angeles.

E: Is the business still there?

B: No. My uncle passed away about 3 or 4 years ago, 2 years ago at the age of...I think he was about 86. And at that time he was already retired. He had passed the business on to one of my cousins and my cousin didn't like the grocery business so he closed up and just went to work.

E: Your cousins still live in Los Angeles?

B: Yes, quite a few of them.

E: Generally speaking, what kinds of occupations do they have today?

B: Oh, I think most of them live in either middle-class neighborhoods or a little bit lower than middle-class. They have regular jobs, nothing outstanding. There may be a few exceptions of one or two cousins--one in Fresno that works for a federal project and another one in San Francisco that is teaching. Aside from that most of them just work regular jobs.

E: What kind of regular jobs?

B: Oh, one of them works for Goodyear Tire Company in the shipping department. Another one works for American Can Company. Another one works for some decal factory--things of that nature.

E: When you were growing up in El Paso, what kinds of employment did you have?

B: Well, we were taught to work since I can remember. I guess even [when I was] 6 or 7 years old my dad would take me--he then had just a meat market--and he would take me to the meat market and I would sweep and wait for him until closing time then go home with him. That was a daily thing plus on Saturdays, all day Saturdays, and half-days Sunday. The first job that I remember was when I was about 12 years old. I started working for Safeway as a sacker and carry-out boy, and then at age 14 they gave me a job in the meat market. And then when I was about 15 years old I started working as a meat cutter for Hot Spot stores. I joined the Service when I was 16. Then when I came back I started helping my father again in the grocery business.

E: Did your brothers have more or less the same kinds of experiences?

- B: Yes, all of them. Right. Work after school and then those Saturdays and Sundays--if not for my father, well, I can remember two of my brothers worked for Safeway and I believe one of them worked for another chain, Food Mart, I believe. But our training was there at my dad's meat market or afterwards in my dad's grocery store that we opened together when I got back from the Service.
- E: During the '40s can you recall salarywise what people were being paid in jobs of that nature?
- B: Well, I remember as a meat cutter my pay was \$39 a week, which I consider that very good at that time. But there were other people not as fortunate. Meat cutting was one of the best-paying jobs at that time and people were earning in the neighborhood of \$15, \$18 a week; very, very common, especially among our people, among the Chicano community.
- E: What year did you go into the Service?
- B: In 1945.
- E: What branch of the Service?
- B: Navy.
- E: Could you tell me something about your experiences during your Service years?
- B: Well, I'm very thankful because I think this is where I really started to awaken to the fact that I was as good or better than other individuals--something that I did not realize while I was attending school. I found out that I could compete in sports or just about anything that I made up my mind to if I was given the opportunity. And this is where I first started to get an opportunity to show what I could do. So, really, they were four hard years but they were very happy years mostly. Oh, I'd say a

little discrimination, because it wouldn't be very uncommon for me to go to a certain part of the ship where they were talking about Mexicans and I would ask them what was going on and they would kind of apologize and say, "Well, you're different. You're not like the typical Mexican. You look more like a Syrian or an Italian." or "You speak English and they don't." I don't know if they really believed it or not, but aside from that the treatment was good. I think it was a lot of misunderstanding from other parts of the country that they were not familiar with the Mexican people and they were surprised to see or maybe to hear a Mexican speak English. They figured that all Mexicans were dark, all Mexicans had a moustache, all Mexicans were short, all Mexicans were fat and none of them could speak English. So, this kind of just opened their eyes, I guess.

E: Did you ever experience any overt discrimination while you were in the Service?

B: No. A few times an argument would end up with somebody calling me a "dirty Mexican." [There were] few Mexicans aboard the ship. I'd say we were about maybe four at one time out of about 1500 men. So we'd have to end up teaming with the Blacks in order to defend ourselves, maybe, when we would be leaving the ship after an argument. This is where the hate would come out--during an argument, being called a "dirty Mexican" and some of my friends getting called "dirty niggers." We found a very common tie as far as when it came to defending ourselves. We were so few that we would kind of have to team up.

- E: Was there ever any expression of that kind of ethnic or racial prejudice against any other minority groups that might have been on ship? Poles or Italians?
- B: Oh yes. I remember I had a couple of Italian friends and they were not well liked. I would be among Anglos and they'd be talking about the Italians, maybe one or two of them. I remember one guy that was from Louisiana and he was French and they'd talk about him calling him--I don't know what they called him--I think Wop or something. Yes, it was a very common thing. I think mostly against, let's say, the French, the Chicano, the Black and the Italian was where these things would come up to the surface.
- E: What parts of the world did you visit while you were in the Navy?
- B: Well, it was entirely the Pacific Ocean, some islands--Hawaii. I guess the furthest I went was China right before the Communists took it over. That was around 1946 that I was in China for about a year and a half. So it was all around the Pacific and our home ports. The ports that we would visit would all be on the West Coast which was something I really enjoyed, because I believe at that time that we received better and sometimes even equal treatment. Even though we were Chicanos we received better treatment on the West Coast than we did here in El Paso at that time.
- E: When you went on shore in the Far East, how did Orientals or Malaysians or whatever perceive a Mexican American? Did you ever reflect on this?
- B: Yes, quite a few times. I think we were welcomed a lot better than the Anglo. They felt a lot closer to us than they felt to the Anglo. There seemed to be some type of a mutual tie of some type.
- E: Do you think maybe it was skin color?

B: It could have been, yeah, that we were different color of skin. In Hawaii, of course, everybody reminded me of the people here at home in El Paso--the fact that they were also brown, very tanned. And in China they were real friendly people. I think they were a lot more friendly with people of black hair or with brown color. If there was a Syrian or Italian, I think, or a Mexican American they would find it a lot easier to do business with us or just socialize with us than they would with an Anglo. I remember also that I used to find it a lot easier aboard ship. With a few exceptions most of my friends were either Italian or Syrian or that one French guy, and then one French-Spanish also from Louisiana, plus the Chicanos. All the Chicanos, all of us were friends at that time. It was just an automatic thing.

E: Did you ever stop in the Philippines?

B: No, never in the Philippines.

E: What did you do when you got out of the Navy? And when did you get out of the Navy?

B: I got out of the Navy in 1949 and I went ahead and joined the Naval Reserve for four years. I went back to my dad's meat market. About a year later we bought a bigger building just a few doors down, the same block. Then instead of a meat market we went ahead and made it a grocery store and meat market, so really we have been in that same block on South Stanton Street, the 500 block; or my dad has been there for around 50 years or so. This is one thing that I'm very happy about and very proud of, the fact that even though we moved away from the neighborhood our place of business has always been in that part of town. I have always associated, I have always known the people down there. They have known us and this is a very

good feeling because I have never lost touch with that part of the community. I have not forgotten what it's like to live down there because I'm always reminded of it since we're down there every day. A lot of our friends come from that area and this showed during my political life, that these people are very friendly towards me. I'm very popular now in the Mexican American community.

E: Could you tell me about what year your father's business took its first significant up-swing?

B: Well, at that time I was working for Hot Spot stores and I realized that the war was the one that made the difference for most of the businesses, here in El Paso anyway. A lot of the little meat markets, a lot of the small grocery stores, you couldn't help but make money for the fact that merchandise was so scarce and people were hoarding merchandise. They would buy anything that was for sale, so all of the people that I remember, even people in South El Paso, business would start getting bigger and better.

E: So you would say during the early and mid '40s?

B: Oh yes.

E: Any particular year?

B: During the war years.

E: Is there any particular year better than the others?

B: I'd say around 1943. Things just seemed to be starting to get better for everybody. People had more money. It seemed like everybody was working. And this is when everybody just seemed to grow, develop.

E: I'd like to ask you a question with regard to the competition from Ciudad Juárez in the meat business. What is the nature of that competition? Does it exist?

B: Well, I'd have to be honest and say it does exist, but then at the same time I don't think it affects business down where we're at, down in South El Paso. In South El Paso you find that you have to be competitive because you're in a neighborhood where it's mostly poor people, and in a lot of cases people without jobs. So you have to be competitive. We cannot get the prices that they get up on the north side of town. We can certainly go up on the price, but then we stop selling merchandise. So I really had never looked at Juárez as being a competitive force. I think it's a two-way street. We get a lot of customers from Juárez and I'm sure a lot of our customers buy some things in Juárez. So it's a two-way street. I think we're very lucky to have the two cities. Really, we shouldn't be selfish because the Mexican people spend a lot of money here and we spend a lot of money over there. They need us and we need them. I don't think that one could do without the other really.

E: I've interviewed other people who have lived here in El Paso since the teens and the '20s and they have more or less said the same thing. I'd like to ask you, furthermore, what are your impressions about the recent controversies over the international transportation here on this area of the border?

B: Well, at that time I had just left my city office as Alderman and I ran for Mayor and got defeated by a very rich individual, a millionaire. And I'm a great believer that if there was any understanding on the side of the city officials here in El Paso that the transportation problem could be solved. I honestly believe that...I remember reading an article, this was right after I left office I guess in '73. There was a newspaper article where the mayor [at that time] made a comment about the Mexican government.

And at that time they were talking about the streetcar and the buses; and then there was an article in the Mexican newspaper where they were attacking the mayor of El Paso for talking about the Mexican government, about the Mexican President. And I had to agree with the Mexican people that it was not his place to comment--the mayor of a city next to a Mexican city to comment about the Mexican government. I don't think he really should have, not publically anyway.

E: What was the exact nature of that comment?

B: Well, about the Mexican government taking advantage and wanting the best of things and always wanting things their way. I have heard this several times here in El Paso by politicians and I think that it's just the fact that they do not know the Mexican mentality--that they are good, kind-hearted people, but they don't like to be taken advantage of. And I think this is where everything gets fouled up when you have two governments, whether they're city or federal, that do not understand each other, do not have that trust and respect for each other. Then México, or any other country, or any other city's going to fight back. I think the two countries, the two cities, the way that two people can sit down and talk about differences and come up with an understanding--this is the way it could have been worked out as far as the transportation system. It hurts both cities and it's a shame because it does hurt mostly the poor people, the ones that do not have cars to travel back and forth. These are the ones it really hurt.

E: One of my other interviewees has attributed a good deal of the problem to arrogance on the part of city officials in El Paso. Do you tend to disagree or agree with that?

B: I agree with that. I agree with that completely. This is why I felt the great urgency to run for mayor of the city of El Paso. I knew that if I would be elected mayor that I could certainly be able to sit down with city officials from Juárez and the communication would be there. I think that I showed what could be done when I was the city Alderman. The communications between our Police Departments and our Fire Departments that I was in charge of was beautiful with the same departments in Juárez. We had visits pretty often from the departments over there in Juárez coming here to El Paso; and then we would return the visit by going up there representing the Police Department or the Fire Department or both. We would attend all of the parades, all of the functions that we were invited to in Juárez. For me it was a pleasure to be able to speak with people that spoke the language that I was born speaking. So I really had great hopes of having one big, beautiful city out of the two cities.

E: Are there any Americans in El Paso politics today that have similar views to yours on this particular issue?

B: None that I can think of. Here in El Paso?

E: Yes, sir.

B: People in office right now?

E: Yes, sir.

B: I think one Anglo American would be, I think, Representative Luther Jones. [He] might have the same philosophy, or seem to have. I have not been with him for the last five, six months or more. But that's the type of individual that he struck me [as]--fair. I would say he would be one and right now I really can't think of another one. I would have to see the list, but right now I can't think of

anybody else.

E: While you were running for the office of Mayor of El Paso, were you ever given any reason to believe that people of influence in Ciudad Juárez preferred your candidacy to that of your opponent?

B: No, none whatsoever. I guess we were so busy campaigning over on this side that I did not receive any contributions. I would like to think that the people of Juárez would have preferred to have had a Mexican American as mayor, somebody that could be able to sit with them and work out the problems as brothers should, as people should. But I have no indication. The Mexican papers did interview me quite a few times and I appreciated that a lot. I felt, and I still do, that the news media certainly didn't do me any favors, the news media here from El Paso; and that is a shame because the fact that I am a Mexican American should have no bearing really, and it did. I think they should have looked at my qualifications. Whenever I ran on somebody's ticket, whenever they wanted me to serve on a certain board, then I was a good Mexican. Whenever I decided to run for the highest office in the city of El Paso, then I was called all kinds of names. I was not qualified, they forgot the many boards that I served on that the same people that went against me asked me to serve on just a few years before. To me this has certainly proved that man doesn't change; ~~if ne changes, I think it's for the~~ best. I certainly feel that I changed for the best. I knew the city well; I knew the departments; I worked hard. As a city Alderman, I put in more time than any other Alderman that I've known of. I made it my total job day and night. They couldn't criticize that but they found other things, like the fact that I was very friendly towards the young Chicanos. [That] was something that I'm not ashamed of and I'd [do]

the same thing all over again. To me, they're entitled to the same treatment as anybody else. They tried to play this as being anti-American, which is not true. I've come to the conclusion that any time a Chicano speaks out for his people he will be crucified, especially by the people with money that want the power. When a Chicano tells them, "No, I want to be myself, I want to do the job for the people," then they have no more use for you.

E: You made a reference to your friendship with young Chicanos in El Paso. There was a much celebrated incident at one of the high schools that got big play in the El Paso media. Do you recall what I'm talking about?

B: During my campaign?

E: Yes.

B: Oh yeah, yeah. The incident.

E: Could you elaborate on it, tell us about it?

B: Yes, certainly. I'll tell you as much as I can remember. That morning I received a call from the Police Department telling me that there was a disturbance up at Ysleta High School; that there was a demonstration, there was a sit-down demonstration by students at Ysleta High School, and that the police were already there. The reason that I got this call was that I had instructions with certain policemen that I trusted that any time anything was to happen in any of the schools here in El Paso, I wanted to know about it. Any time that there was a disturbance at any of the factories here in El Paso, I wanted to hear about it because I wanted to look into it. I wanted to be there, to witness everything. In my mind this was for witnessing the behavior of the students and the behavior of the policemen. I have a lot of close friends in the student

[population] and also in the police force. I wanted to be a witness and I didn't want to have to believe what I would read in the newspaper, or have to believe what I would be told by the superiors of my departments that I was responsible for. The Fire Department, the Fire Chief, knew that any time that there was a major fire, regardless of what time it would happen, I was to be called at home; and he did. I thought that was part of my job, part of my responsibility of really being there. Not that I could do anything, but just to be there to see how my departments were operating. When I got there to Ysleta High School, there was about 5 or 6 police cars right in front of the building. There was approximately 300 to 400 students. If I remember correctly, it seemed like most of them were Chicanos. They all looked between 14 and 16 years old. They were hollering and making a lot of noise, chanting. When I got there somebody hollered my name, they recognized me. I asked them to please be quiet, that I wanted to talk to them. They did; right away we heard a silence. I asked them what the problem was. I said, "Do you have any leaders, anybody that could talk for everybody? Everybody can't talk at once." So I remember talking to two boys. They were about 17, 16 years old. They said that they wanted to talk to the principal of the high school and that he wouldn't talk to them. I asked them if they'd wait until I [could] go in and check with the principal. I then went over to the sergeant in charge, I believe he was a sergeant in charge, and I asked him to be sure and tell the men that they were dealing with students; they were young people and to try to be patient and to be cool regardless of what was happening. Just then a lady by the name of Alicia Chacón, who was on the school board of the Ysleta School District at that time,

showed up. Together we walked in and asked for the principal. We were told that the principal wasn't there, that the assistant principal was there. We asked to talk to him and we asked him what the problem was, and where was the principal. And he said, "Well, the principal's not here, he's out of town," and "I don't know what all this is about." So then I told Alicia that I thought it was time for me to probably go and call the Superintendent of the Schools. I had met the man before, so I went and had one of the police cars take me over to the Superintendent's office. He was out for lunch and the Assistant Superintendent asked me if I wanted to wait. So he placed a call and I waited. I asked the Assistant Superintendent, one thing I remember I asked him if he knew what was happening at Ysleta and he said, "No, I don't." I told him what was happening. By then the Superintendent arrived and I told him. He didn't know anything about what was going on. I told him that I didn't have the right to tell them that they should go down there; but I thought that it was a good idea if they were to show up and maybe this would quiet down the students. I told them that I was going to return, I'd be more than glad to give them a ride in the police car and there was nothing to be afraid of. I believe both of them went back with me. We then met inside the school: two or three of the students, the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, the Assistant Principal, Mrs. Chacón, and myself. I don't recall anybody else. The students agreed to have a meeting with the school board and with the Superintendent being present, and they agreed to call off the problem that they had outside. All of the students were supposed to disperse and everything. I was really proud of the fact that

nobody had gotten hurt. All the time that I was there I noticed that the news media were taking pictures. This didn't bother me any. I was kind of used to that, but I believe it was that same night that I was watching TV--I couldn't believe what I saw. They would show my face and then pan the camera over to I believe about two young guys wearing brown berets. Then they would switch the camera over to the strikers' flag, the symbol. Apparently some of the students had raised [it] right next to the state flag or the U.S. flag and then they would pan the camera back to me and back to the two or three students wearing brown berets. It made it seem like the whole affair was a Brown Beret thing and not something that the students had done or were doing. I don't remember the exact words of the announcer at that time, the man taking the film, but it seemed to imply that there was some connection as far as my being there and the fact that the Brown Berets were there. I didn't like what I saw but I realized that there was very little that I could do if anything. Afterwards my campaign manager and myself went and talked to the president of station KROD. He agreed to take a look at the film and let us take a look at the film again, which we did, together with the man that took the film. He agreed that it wasn't the best of publicity for a candidate and we told him we really felt like we had a right, and maybe should, sue the station. He apologized and the man that had taken the film apologized and said that it was not intentional, that this is the way that he saw the whole affair there at Ysleta High School. We then told him that we thought it would be fair for the station to try to make up for what had been done with that film, what hurt

[had been done]. I started to get phone calls from friends and relatives and people telling me what a bad thing [it was] and how bad it looked on TV for me, and that a lot of the Anglo community around Ysleta were talking about what a mistake it was for me to go in and take the side of the students. Also some friends of mine on the Police Department told me that it was very bad publicity and it looked like I was taking the side of the students against the Police Department. For that reason we asked him that if possible we would like for me to get on TV and debate with the other candidate, Mr. Fred Hervey. I told him that I didn't have the money to buy the time, but if the station could do it for the people of El Paso I'd be more than glad to be on TV with Mr. Fred Hervey. The president thought that that would be a good idea for El Paso. He asked somebody there if time was available within the next few days and they told him that there was time. He said that he didn't see any reason why it couldn't be done, that he was going to talk to Mr. Fred Hervey and would let me know within the next two days if it was going to be possible to be on TV. He asked me what kind of a program we wanted, if I would want question and answer. And I told him, no, that I thought that we should just go on TV and just be ourselves and ask each other questions and keep it sort of in a gentleman way. A day or two later the president called me and told me that it would not be possible to have that program. I was very disappointed because I really felt that if I was given the opportunity to face my opponent on TV for about an hour and be given a chance to question [him] and for him to question me, that there was no doubt in my mind that I was a better candidate, better

qualified as far as knowledge of how to run the city of El Paso, the needs of the people and the ways to provide for the needs of the people. So it was a very disappointing thing to me to be turned down, but really I kind of expected it. I was surprised that they had agreed to let us come on TV together.

E: Would you say that the particular incident at Ysleta High School cost you a significant amount of votes during the election?

B: There's no question in my mind from the people that I talked to. We had campaigned pretty heavy in Ysleta. We had talked to a lot of the key people, both Anglo and Mexican American views. We made every meeting that we possibly could make--homes, teas, coffees. And there was no doubt in our mind that we were gaining as far as the Lower Valley, that the people realized that I was honest and sincere about stating that that area of the city had been neglected the same as South El Paso had for many, many years. It was about time that things had to be done. Like the streets--the flooding of streets, the lack of pavement on streets; areas that had been ignored as far as sidewalks; the health problem--the need for a health facility, an emergency hospital even if it was to be a small one. The people were really believing that I was a candidate that would help that area, and after this incident word started getting around that we were losing ground. Especially among the Anglo community [it was said] that I felt that I was too pro-Mexican, and that I wouldn't do anything for anybody except the Mexican American people of El Paso. I think this cost us quite a few votes. It turned quite a few people, especially the middle-class Anglo, against me, and I'm sure some of the middle-class Mexican Americans.

E: Mr. Bencomo, in your mind, what were the principal interest groups that supported you during your campaign, either formally or informally?

B: I'd say that most of the youth were interested because they knew that I was fair and had also taken an interest in their activities. I was promoting the idea of having parks open more hours to youth and for their activities. They liked a certain type of music and some of us older people didn't necessarily enjoy [it] but they certainly should be allowed to use the parks to hear the type of music that they like to hear, and not have to go by the river to be able to listen to their music, their rock music. Another group of people were certainly the Mexican American community, mostly around the Hacienda Heights area, South El Paso; and at one time before the Ysleta incident I think we would have carried most of the folks in Ysleta. Aside from that, business as a whole; probably the small businessman since I've always been a businessman myself and had an interest of somebody that would be fair to the business community. I think the big business was scared of me and I have never been able to figure why they were. Word got around that I was strictly pro-Chicano and against big business, that I was pro-labor and at any cost would help the labor force regardless of who I would hurt as far as big business.

E: What kind of support did you have from labor?

B: The labor people gathered the day of the election and maybe two days before, and they went door-to-door election day and they handed out leaflets reminding people to get out and vote. It was a door-to-door campaign and I believe the increase of votes that I got on the run-off election was due to the work of a lot of

youth, a lot of volunteer help; and the help that we got from the labor people, from, for instance, Mr. Alfred Montoya, who's a good friend of mine. There was such a big turn out because I made all of the precincts that day and we were very pleased with the voter turn-out, especially in the areas where I knew that I was popular--in Thomas Manor, South El Paso. The only thing that was very displeasing to me was the fact that there was a lot of gripes about the treatment that people were getting there at the voting places--machines breaking down; people not being able to find the place where they were supposed to vote; finding out that they were supposed to be registered in a certain precinct; their name was not on the list; they were turned away--things like that bothered me that day, but there was hardly anything that I could do. The people with me at that time--my campaign manager and other close friends that were going with me to the different voting precincts--were very pleased. They thought that we actually were winning the election on account of the heavy turn-out. But somehow, deep inside of me, I realized that the big voter turn-out that we were having in the precincts where I was pretty popular [was] the same in the conservative precincts, for instance, where I was living at that time--around Coronado. I've lived in the Coronado area I guess for about close to 15, 17 years. In all that time in the three elections that I have been in, I have never gotten over 1/3 of the vote. So these are the places where I was afraid that all of the hate that had been projected by the news media was going to hurt--by these people turning out to vote against me, maybe not for the other candidate.

E: With regard to the voting irregularities that you mentioned, such as machines breaking down and people being turned away and so forth, have you ever had any reason to believe that any of this was intentional?

B: Yes, there's no doubt in my mind. It is my opinion that elections can be rigged. I don't know too much about the machines, but I know that every time the machines break down it causes a delay and people get tired and walk away. At Alamo School the polls closed about 15 minutes earlier. I think the cut-off time was 7 o'clock and they closed at a quarter to 7. Somebody was in line that was smart enough to call the Police Department. By the time the police got there, what people had been in line had already left Alamo School. How many votes that cost me, I don't know; but if I remember the law correctly, if you are in line by 7 o'clock you will get to vote regardless of what time it is. I don't know who is responsible for this. I understand that it has happened in other elections where Mexican Americans have been running for office. I don't know what can be done. I felt like filing suit and then I thought about it and thought that maybe the people would take it as [my] being a sore-loser, which is something I never want to be. I was sorry that I lost the election. I don't know whether a re-count would have made any difference; I don't know whether an investigation would have made any difference--I might have still lost. So I thought the manly thing to do would be to just go ahead and take [it] as another campaign that I had lost.

E: In your mind, Mr. Bencomo, what were the major segments of the El Paso population that supported your opponent?

B: I don't know what you mean by that.

E: What social elements supported your opponent?

B: Oh, there's no doubt it would be the ultra-conservative, your conservative. As far as the Democratic party, I believe that I would have come out a lot better if they had not gotten three other Mexican Americans on their ticket. This was very surprising to me. I didn't think that El Paso was ready for this, but this just convinced me that if you have plenty of money and if you're able to buy enough TV time, you can turn an unknown into a well-known figurehead in just a matter of a few weeks. I think that the three Mexican Americans that were on that ticket kind of split the following that I had among the Mexican American people-- just the fact that some of their relatives, some of their friends had been my friends and otherwise would have voted for me. They did a beautiful job. I think in areas like Coronado, in North East, where I attended several coffees, I found out and felt very confident that if I was given the opportunity to really talk to people face to face and let them ask me whatever questions they wanted to ask me, once they realized what type of an individual I was and what my goals were, there was no doubt in my mind that I could beat just about any candidate at that time. The only thing that hurt was that I couldn't get around to all of these neighborhoods to be able to answer questions; but people were amazed at the fact that I was very fair. By "people" I mean the Anglo community; about my ideas of fairness among the Anglo and the Mexican American; the fact that I knew that the Mexican American did not receive the fair treatment; that Mexican American

neighborhoods were not kept up as well as in the area where I lived up in Coronado. I think that that gave them a chance to think. I used to tell people, "Put yourself in our place. What would you do?" They would all admit that what had been going on for years was not fair, and that a change should be made to treat all of the areas of El Paso in the same manner, as far as services.

E: What do you think was the principal reason that these Mexican Americans who were on your opponent's ticket joined your opponent?

B: Well, that's pretty hard to answer. I did talk to one of the people that got elected with Fred Hervey; two years later he decided to run for mayor. He told me that he had been an innocent victim, that he had not realized what they were trying to do to him; but he admitted that at that time they used him and the other two to get into office to hurt me. Now he knew better and that was the reason that he wanted to run for office. I didn't know the man well enough to really believe what he was telling me. He asked me if I would be on his ticket; he asked me if I would support him and, of course, I said no. I was very deeply hurt [because of] the fact that I had talked to at least two of the Mexican Americans running on that Fred Hervey ticket and tried to discourage them from running. I pointed out that this was a tactic that had been used before to defeat a Mexican American running for office, and I had no response during the election. Their behavior was about the same as that of the man running for mayor; in fact, a lot of them were used to criticize me on TV, on radio. Most of it was not true. It was undue criticism. So they were really used and I don't think that they were that ignorant to have been used without

their knowledge, so I think that they were in agreement. They wanted to get into office so bad that they actually prostituted their philosophies and their beliefs to get into office.

E: If indeed what this individual said about being contrite about having run on your opponent's ticket, did you ever hear anything about the other two individuals that might substantiate this?

B: No. One of the other individuals, before he decided to run with the Henderson ticket, sent word to me by a real close friend that the timing for me to run for mayor was then, which was about approximately two years after the time that I ran for mayor before. [He said] that if I would run for mayor--he was fed up with Fred Hervey and that bunch--he would run on my ticket as an Alderman. I told him that I still had not recuperated financially, that I still was about at that time close to \$10,000, \$12,000 in the hole from the previous election, and that I didn't think that I should run again for office until I had paid all my political debts. To be honest with you, even if I had been able to run there was no way that I would put a man like that on my ticket; no way. It's very hard to explain that somehow the man already had two years' experience as an Alderman, and his behavior on the City Council was being a "yes" man. I always believed that a city Alderman or a man in office should always vote his convictions and always be himself, even if he knows he's going to lose what he stands for and the way that he votes. He should vote the way he feels. This man--and none of the ones that actually served with Fred Hervey--I think were ever themselves; certainly not the Mexican Americans. I think all three of them were "yes" men,

and I would never have an individual like that on my ticket.

E: Mr. Bencomo, can you foresee any set of circumstances under which you might seek political office in El Paso again in the future?

B: I have never ruled out the possibility. It hurts me to think about the fact there's very few people who can afford to run for office, very few people as far as the Mexican American community, that are well-known enough to be able to win an election. I believe under the right circumstances, which would be...my way of thinking has changed quite a bit. Unless my wife would agree to be my personal secretary, to be one of the individuals on my ticket, that's about the only way that I'll run--if we can be together in office.

E: Mr. Bencomo, concerning the Anglo American support which you received during your campaign--could you tell me what did these individuals have in common? Was it youth, liberal politics, what?

B: I think it was a combination. I really believe that a lot of the Anglo youth could see the fairness, especially your students, the educated. Another one would be the liberal element. And others would just be the working people that expect nothing except somebody that would be fair to everybody--the rich, the poor. So I think it was a combination. There's a lot of good Anglos in our city. By "good" I mean people that are understanding and that have an awareness of the problems of the majority of the Mexican Americans and are willing to go ahead and join in the fight to overcome that. They want change as much as we do. I think this is where my following was--in people that really believed in fairness in politics.

E: What was the ethnic composition of your campaign committee?

B: I really don't remember. I would say it was pretty close to 50-50 either way.

E: Anglo American and Mexican American?

B: Yes.

E: To what extent was there a problem in getting out the Chicano vote during that particular election?

B: The biggest problem for the run-off was the fact that it's held on a Tuesday. It is known certainly by all the working people, that it's pretty hard to go to work and get out of work at 6:00, 6:30, 5:00, go home, and then still go out and vote for somebody. This is something that should be changed; because certainly a man that owns his own business can leave his business any time that he wants to, to go vote. Even though, according to law, a man can ask for permission to leave his job, 90% of the people either don't know about it or hate to ask to be able to go out and have some time to go vote. From my experience, being involved in several campaigns, I would say this was the biggest factor as far as your conservative having a hold of our politics here in the state of Texas--the fact that they have to vote on a working day. I really believe that if that had been a Saturday I would have won that run-off election.

E: Another prominent Mexican American politician from this area has suggested that the Spanish surnamed majority in El Paso is somewhat deceptive since many of these people are aliens of one kind or another and don't have the right to vote. Do you perceive this to be the case? To what extent is this true?

B: I never based my campaigns on the percentage of Spanish surnames here in the city of El Paso. I always based it on the percentage of Spanish surnames that were registered to vote, and I remember distinctly that in South El Paso there was about 1200 to 1500 people that could have voted and did not vote on that day. There's no doubt in my mind that these people were certainly registered to vote, and there's no doubt that they were maybe 99% Mexican-Americans. There's no doubt in my mind that if they had gone out to vote they would have voted for me, 90% of them. I guess it gets right back to the fact that it's a working day and it's hard for people to get off of work and want to go out and bother to vote and stand in lines. The biggest turn-out is after 5:00--between 5:00 and 7:00. And I don't think there's too many people that would like, or would bother, to stand in line for a couple of hours, which is about how long it would take to vote for somebody.

E: Mr. Bencomo, what are the mechanics of politicizing the Mexican American in South El Paso to vote, to take part in the electoral process? Did you saturate the area with publicity or did you have loud speakers?

B: No. I knew that most of the people, if not all of the people of South El Paso, knew who I was or had met me; or they certainly knew that I had always been involved in one thing or another in South El Paso for years. What we did was mostly saturate the area with door-to-door knocking and reminding people, making meetings at the different churches, the centers, gyms.

E: Could you name a few of those centers, sir?

B: Yes. For one, Armijo Center. Another one would be Sacred Heart Church. There were neighborhood meetings; I had a talk with the organization MAYAS at that time, asking for their support, different clubs in South El Paso, mostly youth clubs. [We made] telephone calls to what few clubs are in South El Paso, and then just made contact with the key people in the schools, in the PTAs. In the business community we visited with the store owners there in South El Paso, distributed material around the churches and around the schools. I would say that was about the extent of it.

M: Were there times when these Chicano groups put you in a position where they wanted a commitment about what you would do in a situation related to the Chicano community which would put you in a position where the answer that you gave would cast you in a negative light in Anglo American eyes? That is, to take a public position about something with the Chicano community?

B: During that election, no. One thing that was brought out was the meeting that I had attended at Bowie High School. It was a Mexican American meeting of Mexican American leaders, and I attended that meeting and I was asked to speak. The following day my speech, which had been taken out of context, was given a lot of publicity. There was an article in the school magazine up at UTEP; the unfairness of quoting a speech and the fact that not the whole speech is given or written. There was nothing about that speech that I was embarrassed about, or afraid of, or that I would ever take back. I made it as a speech coming from my heart about things that were happening here in the city of El Paso. Everything that I said was true, and the way that the news media will turn something like that around is very, very unfair.

M: What was there in the speech that was objectionable to the Anglos?

B: What I can remember, and these will not be the exact words, was something to the effect that I had said that being an American all my life had done nothing for me. The speech was given in Spanish. The point that I was trying to make was the fact that I was an American citizen all my life, having been born here in the U.S.; but the fact that my skin was brown, that I was a Chicano, I still had to prove myself over and over again. I volunteered to serve my country for the first time when I was 15 years old; I joined the Marine Corps. I then joined the Navy when I was 16. I put in four years in the regular Navy, four years in the Navy Reserves, and still my loyalty to my country was questioned just because I was proud of being Chicano, proud of being a Mexican American. These are the things that I find, and will always find unfair--for me to have to prove my loyalty and my love to my country just because I'm proud of my heritage, of my culture, of what I am.

E: If a historian were to go back to the newspapers during that campaign and were to try to find quotations from that speech, could you tell us in approximately what month and year this speech was given? Do you recall?

B: Let me see. I'll guess that it was somewhere around July, it was summer; and it would have been about three years ago.

E: In your mind, did the quotations that were taken from that speech distort the message that you were trying to put across?

B: Yes, certainly. Any time that I speak I try to do it to better things. If something's wrong with this country, if something's wrong with anything, I will point it out. I think that that is

my duty, especially if I am in office, or especially if I am a so-called leader of the community. I think it's my duty to point out what I see as being wrong. Certainly my message was not to lie to anybody. Whatever I said at that time in that speech, I would still be able to repeat right now with a clean, clear conscience.

E: Generally speaking, Mr. Bencomo, do you think the news media distorted the reporting of your campaign?

B: Very much so. Sometimes they just do not report; they don't say how many people attended a rally, who got the applause, especially if it was somebody that they do not particularly care for. They have a way of more or less ignoring a candidate--taking him out of the light, out of the eyes of the people, and projecting another candidate as a favorite candidate of the people. There are different methods that I have been able to detect as being used to hurt or to help a candidate. They'll write an article on their favorite candidate as big news, and just hardly mention the other candidate, or mention him as little as possible. But some of the rallies that we attended were very good. The people were certainly in the spirit. They were ready for change, and I really believe that the timing was right, if I had been given a fair chance by the news media.

E: Do you suspect that there was any active collusion among the news media, or do you think it was simply understood because of their political kinship?

B: It's pretty hard to say. I would think that it would probably be automatically understood, since Fred Hervey is very well known and has such big interest in the business community--banking, grocery business, different boards, advertising. Automatically at the beginning, when I tried to hire a PR firm, I could sense that even

though I did know some of these people and they were friendly towards me, somehow they always would say, "I'll let you know in a day or two. We're going to have to check with the manager." When the day or two would come up they'd say, "We're sorry. We like you a lot. We believe in what you're doing. You have served the city of El Paso well, but the manager doesn't think that we should get involved in a political campaign." Of course, I knew better, because these same firms had been involved in other political campaigns. Somehow the word would get around that to go against Fred Hervey would hurt. The news media certainly would be hurt by the lack of advertising that Fred Hervey does with the newspapers and radio. I found out that he is one of the strongest individuals in the city of El Paso. We had been doing business with some banks maybe for over 20 years, and their contribution would be something like \$200; I know that other candidates would get maybe \$1000 or \$2000. Maybe indirectly these people worked through attorneys. So the word does get around. They do have meetings and not all the time do the people that actually run the city and run politics--the political machine--show up at these meetings. I would suspect that there's maybe two or three that will send somebody else to represent them, and they could be attorneys or PR people. They don't care to have their name mentioned or to show themselves at a meeting, but I know that their attorneys or another representative will be present at the meeting where these people decide who to back. These are the big money people.

E: Mr. Bencomo, which do you perceive to be the chief economic institutions in El Paso today?

B: The banks certainly carry a lot of power. I know that when we wanted to go ahead and expand our grocery store, we had bought a former church. We gave some money down and were very confident since we had dealt with a certain bank for over 20 years and had never had to borrow money. We had always carried a good balance; our credit was good. When we went to borrow money to pay off the rest of the balance on that piece of property, we were turned down. I went ahead and visited about two other banks--a total of about three or four banks--and we were turned down. One bank told us, "Well, that's a problem. You've never borrowed money before so we don't know whether you actually will be able to pay that money back or not." This was right before I had gone into office for the first time in 1963. We were able to borrow the money from an insurance company at about two or three per cent more than the rate they were charging at the banks at that time. We went ahead and got the loan and agreed to pay that high interest. A few months after I got into office and I was the city Alderman for the first time, one of the officers of one of the banks where we had been turned down came up to me and asked me if we had ever gotten our loan. I told him, "Yes, but we're paying real high interest." He said, "Well, why don't you come back and let's talk about it. Maybe we can get you the money." I did go back, and there was no problem this time. I sat down and figured out in pencil what it would cost me, because I would have to pay a penalty to the insurance company for changing my loan to a bank. I figured out that high interest that we were going to pay the insurance company and I knew that we would come

out better financially if we went with the bank; so we did go with the bank. This makes me think that it all depends on who you are, and where you are, whether these people will help you or not.

E: Besides the banks, which other institutions in this city do you think are premiere?

B: I'd say the Chamber of Commerce is a very powerful tool that is being used by maybe a dozen people here in the city of El Paso. I am a member of the Chamber of Commerce myself, but so are a lot of other people that really have no say-so, or really don't know what is going on in the Chamber of Commerce. I would say that that was the biggest tool of the way that they get things done--the way that they can spread rumors, the way that they can make recommendations. This was pointed out not too long ago when there was an election that was going to be held. There was a question to be decided by the voters of El Paso as far as the Police and Fire Department. The Chamber of Commerce came out against the Police and Fire Departments. Then I was asked by these two Departments if I would come out and explain to the people of El Paso why it was necessary to go and vote for this proposal. I went ahead and agreed to do so because I thought that it was really an injustice for the Chamber of Commerce to side against these two Departments. Actually they should have no interest except what other interests a voter might have, but certainly not as a Chamber of Commerce come out against these two Departments.

E: At the time that you were an Alderman in El Paso politics, who were the most prominent local Chicano politicians?

B: The only one at that time that I can remember was Richard Téllez, who was a County Commissioner. I believe Rogelio Sánchez was also in office. I can't think of anyone else. I believe that Raymond

Telles had been the last and the only Chicano mayor. Ernie Ponce had been the last and the only Chicano Alderman. I believe that's all right there.

E: Which Chicano politicians in El Paso do you admire the most today?

B: Paul Moreno, Armando Peralta, certainly, as Judge; George Rodríguez, Jr., George Rodríguez, Sr. I don't know if I missed anybody else. I don't think I forgot anybody.

E: Do the Chicano politicians in local government today have the interest of the Mexican American community, in general, at heart, in your view?

B: In my opinion, very few of them. I named those people for that sole reason; they do have the interest, not only of the Chicano, but of the city as a whole. I think the problem with a lot of the Chicanos in office is that they cater too much to the rich and too much to the Anglo, because they are afraid that they will not get re-elected if they really show themselves as being interested in the rest of the community, in the Chicano community, in the poor sections of the city. This is my personal opinion, from what I've been able to tell from listening to some of them talk. They're actually afraid of showing any interest as far as the minorities [are concerned].

E: In your opinion, what will it take for Chicanos to achieve greater political influence in El Paso? That is, power commensurate with their numbers?

B: In my opinion, first, the Mexican American community or the Chicano Community the majority have to be proud of what we are and not be ashamed. [They must] not try to hide or forget the fact that they are Chicanos. When they get an education they should try to help the ones that cannot get an education or have not gotten an education. I think

once the majority of us have that pride, then we can go out and automatically will try to help our own people. I would never like to see it where everything would be all Chicano, but I would like to see the percentage be on an equal basis; and that would apply to teachers, judges, whatever. Everything should be on a percentage basis or pretty close.

E: What do you consider to be the most important stepping stones for achieving this kind of power? Is it education, is it politics, is it the military, is it the social ladder?

B: I think it's the education. I think that it is all churches' responsibility to point out that it is a social injustice that we suffer here in El Paso and in all parts of the country; the churches and the schools should set an example, and that example will then be followed by other people. If this is not practiced in the churches and in the institutions like the schools, then I think other individuals can do nothing but follow the examples.

E: Mr. Bencomo, does the church have that much influence amongst the youth of El Paso today? Or does it potentially have that influence?

B: It can potentially have that influence. It certainly has the influence of the people that go to church. If the churches see discrimination and see social injustice and say nothing about it and keep quiet, then automatically people going to these churches think that this is right. I think the biggest stepping stone was that the Catholic Church, the Bishop, came out in favor of the Farah strikers. I thought that that was really a tremendous step forward for the labor force of El Paso to know that the Catholic Church had an interest and that they would speak out against

social injustice. So I have great faith that the churches, all churches, are moving in that direction. We cannot tell people to love their brother, love thy neighbor, and then practice something else than what we preach.

E: Would you personally encourage or discourage young Chicanos from pursuing positions in El Paso city government, elective positions?

B: I would do everything to encourage them. I always try to back a Chicano candidate if I really think that the man is honest and will be dedicated to doing a good job for everyone, and not be afraid to step out and speak in favor of the Chicano or of the poor people. I would back that candidate even though sometimes I realize that the odds are against him and he will lose the election. To me, the idea is that I should back somebody that I believe in, and not just try to back a winner. This is another thing that's wrong with some of our local Chicano politicians. They would always try to pick a winner, and that makes them feel or look like winners themselves. I think that, regardless of the odds, if we believe in somebody, and he is a Chicano, a good Chicano and qualified, I certainly believe that the Chicano community should go behind him all the way.

M: Mr. Bencomo, I want to ask you a question regarding the recent election of Governors Castro and Apodaca in Arizona and New Mexico. Do you think that indicates a new direction in the success of Mexican American politicians?

B: Yes it does. I never met Mr. Castro. I do know Jerry Apodaca, and I admire the man quite a bit. He's one of the people that I'm talking about when I say "somebody that's proud of his heritage," the fact that he is a Chicano. I think that this will open doors and

certainly give confidence to Chicanos, as far as knowing that elections can be won and to go in and run for office. They have a lot of qualified people, but I think that a lot of them do not run because they think that they do not have a chance [because] they are Mexican Americans or Chicanos. I think those were two great victories; and again I would like to stress that all they have to do, in my opinion, is to be fair to everybody. They do not have to work miracles for the Mexican American communities, but just be themselves and show that fairness should be applied to everyone; and I sincerely believe that these people can get re-elected for a second term if they do run for a second term.

M: Both of these people are Democrats.

B: Oh yes. If I can make a comment, I think that really the only people, in my opinion, that should belong to the Republican party are the very wealthy people--that's the party for them. There's no doubt in my mind. This has been my philosophy all along. This is not to say that the Democratic party is perfect; it is far from perfect. This is when I believe that we, as Chicanos, should use one party against the other to get where we want, to get the things that we need. That is by showing that we can, if necessary, sacrifice our Democratic beliefs (or my Democratic beliefs) in backing a Republican candidate; not because I think or know that he's going to do any better, but because I know that that Democratic candidate is going to take us for granted. Maybe deep inside he's not a true Democrat, as far as his philosophy. He's using that as a label to get elected. I think a fine example of that was John Connally. Right after Robert Kennedy's death I backed a Republican candidate

at that time. I explained in that newspaper article that it was not that I was switching parties, but that the Democratic party that existed without Robert Kennedy as a candidate was just going to be a rubber stamp of the Johnson administration, which, in my way of thinking, had not done enough for the Chicano, the Black, the poor. Hubert Humphrey was a man with a label of being a liberal but living in the past, and had not changed and progressed with the times. I thought that a vote for the Democratic party or for Hubert Humphrey at that time would be like telling the Democratic party, "Everything's all right. You have done well," which I didn't believe at that time.

M: You supported Richard Nixon, then, at that time?

B: Yes, right.

M: Did you actively campaign or engage in activities in support of Nixon?

B: No. It was mostly an endorsement. It was a lot of built-up anger inside of me. I sincerely felt that the Democratic party indirectly had been responsible for the death of Robert Kennedy; the hate that had been spread around about the man being ruthless. I happened to have been contacted a few months before to see if I would have been interested in taking the job of Campaign Manager for the state of Texas. I had agreed, not to be the Campaign Manager, but to be Co-Campaign Manager for Senator Kennedy in the state of Texas. You know, it goes back to the news media--what they can do to a man to try to destroy him. Really, I was full of anger right after his death, and I could just not see any solution for the Chicano people, for the poor people, and the Blacks by endorsing or helping Hubert Humphrey at that time. I thought it was going to be a continuation of the rich Democrats running the country and doing as little as they could for the people who were in need.

- E: Mr. Bencomo, not to sound too contentious, I'd like to ask you how you can say that Johnson had not done that much for the country? The Great Society programs which he instituted, however misdirected they may have been, did reach certain segments of the country that hadn't had this kind of help since the New Deal era; and in addition to that, the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s also did a tremendous amount. What was it specifically that disenchanted you about the Lyndon Johnson era in American history?
- B: I was a great supporter and a great believer of John Kennedy. I loved his philosophy. I think that the man would have been the greatest President if he had been able to continue, if his death hadn't come about. I guess, deep in my heart, I always looked at Johnson as being a typical Texan. When he did start to make better strides for the poor and for the minorities, I judged it as being strictly for political reasons. I always felt that a lot more could have been done, but that he did just barely what he could to keep the people content. I really cannot specifically point now to any certain thing, but that was just a personal feeling of mine. It's like pressure that had been built up by hope, that had been built up by President John Kennedy; and this man had no other way to go but just to try to keep the people half-way happy and content. To me, he was a fairly good leader. I think he learned a lot from President Kennedy. But still, there was so much and there's still so much to be done. I think that a lot of politicians take advantage of it and just do barely enough to keep people peaceful, but they're really not the true candidates of the minorities. I don't know if I've made any sense or not.

E: Speaking of the minorities, the greatest minority in the United States at that time, and now, is the Black American. During the 1960s, especially during the Johnsonian years, there was a tremendous amount of riots. All sorts of disaffection was existent in the ghettos of this country and burnings took place. I would like to ask you, seeing as how a tremendous amount of social legislation and aid to the poor, especially in the ghetto areas of this city, did result as an effect of all these burnings and riotings, what do you perceive to be the use of violence? Is it useful for an emerging minority group? Do you condone it under any circumstance at all? What are your views on this?

B: I think that you can only beat people and keep people suppressed for just a certain amount of time, and I think that it's human nature to want to fight back. I think that all of us try to do it in a decent and fair manner; but then when we're up against a wall...I think if I was in their shoes I would have been doing the same thing. It is hard to explain it, but I can understand it. I can understand it and I cannot blame them, because I think you can drive people to that point. The funny thing is that now people have really lost faith, in my opinion, in this present administration that we have--President Ford--and we're really not seeing too much of any demonstration. I think people just have no hope whatsoever. That has a tendency to slow people up. I'm just guessing that in another year, two years, people are going to be fed up again to the point where we are going to have riots all over again. I think El Paso is another example. Things have been kind of quiet. But there again, it's human nature that takes so much for so long and then

they have to let it out. I'd hate to be around when that time comes here. I think it's going to be a lot worse than it used to be. I think that, there again guessing, instead of just demonstrations, these people are going to be forced to use other tactics--even worse tactics than have been used before: a lot more burning, even a lot more murders.

M: I'd like to ask you a question regarding La Raza Unida party here in El Paso, Mr. Bencomo. How do you assess the role of La Raza Unida party in El Paso politics, going back to when it got started and since?

B: I think it could be a great thing. I think it could be a great tool for the Chicanos. But I think what destroys the power that it could have is our own people themselves. The fact that it's called "La Raza Unida" turns off a lot of the Mexican American community. A lot of the middle-class and upper-class want no part of it because of the word "Raza," which doesn't bother me. I think that, there again, the news media has played it up to a point that they think it's a big sin or that it's unpatriotic to use the word "raza." I really don't see any real powerful tool in the very near future; by that I mean within the next five years. The fact that it scares off a lot of the Mexican Americans in itself will kill La Raza Unida party. I wish that it would be otherwise; but as long as the majority of our people are turned off, I don't see how we could be successful as belonging to or joining La Raza Unida party.

M: Has it played any significant role, then, in past elections?

B: Yes, it has. I'm trying to think of what election...I think it was an election for Governor. It made little difference that the Republican party got more votes than they could have otherwise,

because it drew from the Democratic party. Whenever the Democratic party is really the Democratic party that it should be--by that I mean for all of the people and a party for the working class, for the poor, for the minorities--or whenever that Democratic party follows the philosophy that it was built on, then I don't think that we need La Raza Unida party. Then that [Democratic] party will really be a party for all, and that would include the Chicano and the Black. There has been a trend of improvement in the Democratic party and a lot of that is due to the pressures of the Republican party and of La Raza Unida party. I think that they have forced the Democratic party to be a true liberal party, or try to be. It's changing in that direction, but I think it's a long ways yet from where we can really participate as Chicanos and be treated as equals in the Democratic party. I don't by any means think that the Republican party is a solution, as such. I would never join the Republican party; but I would back Republican candidates [because] I think that once in a while we have to keep the Democratic party scared enough to do things for the people when we want them to, and to follow the philosophy that we believe in.

M: I'd like to ask you about the Telles campaign before he became mayor. Were you active at that time?

B: Yes I was. That was one of the first campaigns that I was active in.

M: Could you tell us about that campaign? What were the issues, how did the news media handle it, how did the Anglo American community look at it?

B: That was quite a while back, but I'll tell you as much as I can remember. In the news media I remember that there was an editor of

the Herald Post, Mr. Cooley, who was openly backing Raymond Telles; this was quite a change. I can't think of any other time that one of the newspapers has really helped one of our people. Mr. Cooley, in my belief, helped Raymond. I think that we caught the majority of the Anglos off guard. They just didn't think that a Mexican American could get elected to office, especially as mayor. I remember a lot of people, I for one, were going door-to-door picking up donations from \$1.00 on up--whatever we could get. There was a lot of people doing the same thing. There was a lot of enthusiasm, and the man did a fairly good job--as well as could be expected for the times. When he ran for office the second time, when he ran for Congress, I personally talked to him and told him that things had changed since he had been mayor. As far as I could see he hadn't changed, and I thought that he should change with times. We had more people who were educated, and just the fact that you were a Mexican American was not enough; the fact that he had gone to the Service and served his country was not enough. I thought that he had to come out and show the people of El Paso where his heart was and that he had an interest as far as the Mexican American community [was concerned].

M: Before he got elected mayor, were there any divisions along ethnic lines played up by the media or Anglo organizations?

B: Truly, I don't remember that much about it. I know that the Mexican American community seemed to be working as a block; there was a challenge there at the thought of having a Mexican American mayor. That feeling was real, real wide-spread. I can't remember anything in the news media that was said against Raymond. His record at that

time was good as far as the military, as far as his experience in office--I think he was in the County Clerk's Office. The man was a good, clean-cut man who had very little that they could hurt him with. I really don't remember the news media. All I remember was a big fight between the El Paso Times and the El Paso Herald Post editors. That's about the only thing that I can remember, and also the enthusiasm that was felt among the Mexican American people of the community.

M: Was that enthusiasm there in the Mexican American community when you ran for mayor--that is, the desire to have a Mexican American mayor again?

B: Yes, I could feel it in talking to the people. I think what hurt me was the Ysleta incident and the so-called speech at Bowie. All of the things that I had done believing that they were good for the Chicano community, thereby good for all the community, were used to make me look like a radical, like a man that was not proud of being an American. I think that that was the difference. Votes were taken away from me, and the three Aldermen that ran on that ticket. In all fairness to them, there were at least two of them that were pretty well known here in the city of El Paso. One was from the all Chicano community, graduated from Bowie. The other one was the middle-class community of Chicano from--we went to the same school--from El Paso High. The other one, well, as a builder I imagine he is fairly well known. So, all these things stacked up. The people that run this city knew by then that I would be a candidate that would not take any instructions from anybody, that I would do whatever I thought would be the right thing to do. I think this

scared quite a few of them, such as the banks or the Chamber of Commerce. They would not be able to control me and there was nothing that we had in common. They were afraid of that.

M: I have a final question regarding local politics. During the Hervey administrations, the relations with Ciudad Juárez were very strained. How do you perceive the problems that led to those bad relations between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso? What were the sources of those problems?

B: I think [it was] the lack of understanding, the lack of caring about the city of Juárez and about the citizens of Juárez on the part of Mayor Fred Hervey and his administration. My personal opinion is that they wanted to show those Mexicans that they would not bend, that they would not give in instead of really trying to go out there and meet them half-way. There's something about the Mexican people; they are very peaceful people, very loving people until they're pushed. They know when they're being pushed and they know when they're being taken advantage of, and they're not going to stand for it. I believe that this is what happened, especially with the transportation problem. It has to be a give and take proposition, and there was just no understanding as far as our city government. We have to want to do something before something is done; I don't think that Fred Hervey ever wanted to do anything. During one of our political meetings, we were talking about something; he got angry and told me how much he had done for the Mexican people when he was in office. I remember that we were answering a question on health, how we felt about the need for health facilities in El Paso. He pointed out that when he had been mayor before that, he had done a lot for the people of El Paso as far as health. He had paved the alleys of South El Paso.

That goes to show you that paving the alleys of South El Paso is solving the health problems of the South El Paso community and of the other parts of El Paso that are not rich enough or wealthy enough; they have to go to health clinics. If paving the streets or paving the alleys is a solution to the health problem, why, that to me just shows a lot of that man. He's just not really aware of the true needs of the people.

E: We discussed the problem of El Paso-Juárez relations to a certain extent on the previous Bencomo tape interview. Mr. Bencomo, what was the exact vote count at the end of the run-off between yourself and Mr. Hervey?

B: There was a difference of, I believe, a little over 4,000 votes in his favor. It was something like 24,000 that I had and 28,000 that he had that time.

E: Mr. Bencomo, we'd like to go back to your life history. We left you back in the late 40s. Starting about 1950, could you tell us what you were doing at that time?

B: In 1950 I was going to El Paso Technical High School, finishing my senior year after leaving the Service. Then I met my wife, my girl-friend Mary, and we got married in 1950. Up to that point [1951] my dad--or the family--had a meat market. At that time we decided we would expand into a meat market and grocery operation. That was my first experience in the grocery business. [I was] active in the business community, serving on different boards, on youth boards like Our Lady's Youth Center. 1950 was dedicated more or less to business, the family, raising a family, and finishing my education. That's about the extent of it--very little politicking.

- M: I'm curious about the style of life among young Chicanos, young single Chicanos. What would you do on a typical weekend, on a Saturday night or Sunday?
- B: On a typical weekend there would be about three or four of us that would go to a dance. It would just happen to be a Chicano dance at somebody's home, or at that time dances at the Cortez Hotel were very popular. It was mostly Chicano clubs that would have the dance; Chicano music. If there was not a dance here there would be one in Juárez, or we'd just go nightclubbing in Juárez. One of my favorite friends at that time, and before then, was Rubén Salazar. He was one of the ones that we'd go out and go nightclubbing with in Juárez. Sunday morning we'd get together at somebody's house and have a couple of beers to feel better after the night before, and rest up to get ready to go to work on Monday. That was really a typical way of life: just have a good time Saturday nights and rest Sunday, and then go back to work Monday.
- M: You mentioned Rubén Salazar. What was he like at that time? How long did you know him?
- B: We met during my sophomore year at El Paso High. He was a happy-go-lucky individual--always liked to have a good time. He had a beautiful sense of humor, terrific sense of humor. After he got into college at UTEP, I think it was Texas Western or College of Mines at that time, he started writing for the newspaper there. I realized that the man had a great talent for writing. His sense of humor was a beautiful one when you put it down in the newspaper. He wrote an article that would be hard for me to forget. [It was] about a rocket had been shot from White Sands and landed in Juárez. He

was kidding about how we as Mexicans always find an opportunity to turn something that could have been a disaster into something with humor. When the rocket fell over there, the first thing that the people of Juárez did was set up flauta stands or taco stands and everything was all right. The fact that there had been danger was all forgotten and everybody was happy again. After he came back from the Service he was a lot more serious. There was that sense of humor, but somehow there was an awareness, an awakening about the Mexican American, about the Chicano. I would imagine that he picked that up in the Service, I'm not sure. Then he went to work for the Herald Post here in El Paso. He wrote a tremendous story about the situation in our City Jail. He wrote the truth. He had himself arrested. They didn't know that he was a reporter; and it was a beautiful story about what was happening--beautiful because it was so honest. It was something that I had never heard of any reporters doing. It could have cost him his job; we always thought that he had been kind of brave for having done something like going against an institution, such as the Police Department, and telling the truth about what was happening in our City Jail. After that he went to work, I believe, for a newspaper in Los Angeles; and from there to San Francisco; and then he was here during the Nixon-Humphrey campaign. He called me and he said that he wanted to interview me as to why I was backing Nixon and not Humphrey. We got together at his hotel room, and then from there we went over to Juárez, for old times' sake; we had the interview over there at the Mex-Tex Bar. He was a lot more serious. After the interview, he told me that he had been through different parts of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, and had found out that a lot of the Chicanos and a lot of the Blacks felt the same

way [I did]--or I felt the same way they did. The Democratic party had to change, and the only way to change it was to go with somebody like Nixon who happened to be running at that time with the Republican party. It was really not going for Nixon; it was backing a Republican candidate instead of going along like we always did as good Chicanos and good Blacks and voting for the Democrat, regardless of who he was. Right before his death, I guess a few months before, my family and I were up in Los Angeles, and we saw him on TV. He was getting interviewed by some big wheel, either ABC or NBC, and they were talking about the police situation in Los Angeles--about the county, the sheriff's office or somebody. It was a big hassle. Something had happened at one of the local high schools and Rubén Salazar was accusing the Sheriff's Department or the Police Department of over-reacting, and actually beating up on some of those students. There again I admired his honesty and braveness for coming out on TV and telling the truth about a situation. I remember very well, as if it had just happened a few minutes ago. He was smiling again and being himself. But I could see then that he really felt an urgency for the Chicano community; and all of the things that he was talking about that were liable to happen, happened. In fact, that's when he was killed, in one of those riots up in East Los Angeles. After that we got together here in El Paso, and I found out that there were some people that knew him and were interested in starting a foundation--the Rubén Salazar Foundation. We met at his parents' home and exchanged ideas, and talked to his mother and his dad and his sister about what we had in mind. Then we went to Los Angeles and sought advice up there. We met some of the people that he had worked with up at

the TV station in Hollywood, and when we came back we went ahead and started the Rubén Salazar Foundation. That has been a good, hard-working group that has issued quite a few scholarships here in El Paso as far as, I believe, in Communications or News Media. It's given to Mexican Americans that want to follow the Communications field. We realize that there's very few, and at that time I think that Rubén Salazar might have been the only one of any major importance anyway. We thought that there was a great need, and this was one way that we could help Chicano students get up there and maybe take the place of people like Rubén Salazar.

M: I'm curious about that story that he wrote locally about the jail. What was that all about?

B: Drugs; sex abuse among prisoners; lack of interest of the Police Department at that time to try to control or improve the bad conditions; the things that were happening in the jail; preference that was given to certain prisoners.

M: Did it have any bearing on the treatment of Chicanos?

B: I really don't remember. The things that I mentioned are the ones that are outstanding in my mind right now.

M: Without any ethnic implications?

B: I don't recall.

E: Mr. Bencomo, do you recall when you first heard the word "Chicano" used in El Paso?

B: A long time ago; when I was a little kid.

E: What decade? Late 30s, early 40s?

B: I'd say the late 30s. All the time that I was in the Service that was a very, very common word. "Are you a Chicano?" Obviously the

guy was; you'd say, "Hey, eres Chicano?" It was like a feeling of brotherhood; I have never agreed with people that say that that is a degrading word. To me that is a loving expression that we feel for another person.

E: You said you were married in 1950, is that correct?

B: Yes.

E: Is your wife Mexican American?

B: Yes, she is. Her maiden name was Rodríguez. Up to that time they were living in what now is the old part of the canal. It was part of the Chamizal that involved the U.S. and México; they were living there on Park and 11th Street.

E: Where was she born?

B: In El Paso. Her dad was born in México and her mother was born in San Elizario.

E: What part of México was her father from? Could she tell us?

Mrs. B: Santa Rosalía de Camargo.

E: In Chihuahua?

B: Santa Rosalía de Camargo in Chihuahua.

E: How many children do you have in your family?

B: Six children--three boys and three girls.

E: Do the children speak Spanish, Mr. Bencomo?

B: Yes, they do; but we find that when they're young they're kind of ashamed to speak Spanish in front of people. We have never, come to think of it, questioned them about it. We joke about it, because when we're alone they speak very good Spanish; they certainly understand and speak it. Yet we've had a problem with them, when they're young, in getting them to speak in front of people. They refuse

to speak Spanish. Once they do grow up, I'd say once they get to be about 17 or 18, automatically they start being proud of it and start speaking it. I'm not intelligent enough to tell you why this is, but our little girl, 5 years old, speaks beautiful Spanish. She'll speak it to us and she'll speak it to the maid--carry on a beautiful conversation. She goes outside and you ask her, "Speak to me in Spanish;" she'll just look at you and won't say anything. If she says something, she'll say it in English. Now, it's something to look into.

E: Do you place any particular importance on bilingualism in your family?

B: Oh yes, very much so. We try to teach them as much as we can about our culture. We try to set an example of the pride that we have, the fact that our parents came from México. We try to teach them a little bit about the history of this part of the country that used to belong to México. It gives us a lot of pride, and we would like for them not to be as timid as I certainly was in growing up. In my younger years [I was] afraid of people knowing that I was a Mexican American because of the consequences of the thing.

E: Mr. Bencomo, I'd like to move into the final phase of this interview. This has to do with some attitudinal questions regarding the American Bicentennial. As you no doubt realize, this is the 200th anniversary of this nation's birth. How do you identify with the founding fathers of this nation: Jefferson, Adams, Washington? What identification, if any, do you have with these people?

B: None whatsoever. I don't think that the Bicentennial is being handled in the right manner. It is my opinion that it should

really be celebrated with the true culture of the starting of this country, which was right here in the Southwest with the Indian and the Spaniard. I would not be interested in any celebration or in any function that we might be invited to. I just could not feel comfortable; I could really not be myself; I just wouldn't care to be there. I think it's being celebrated in the wrong way and publicized in the wrong way. More emphasis should be put on the Indian and the Mexican culture, the real true founders of the Southwest, the place where we're living right now. I couldn't participate and feel comfortable or feel happy about it. I really feel that we're being left out almost completely.

E: What are your opinions about the political philosophies that this country's founding fathers set forth in 1775-1776?

B: I don't think that it really helps us in any way or that it is anything that we can relate to. I would relate more to the Indian culture of this country. I can relate more to the culture of México. I love to read about the history of México, going back to the 1400s and the 1500s, and the culture that existed here in this part of the country in those years, too. It's beautiful, but it's something that I never learned while I was going to school. It's something that I've had to read on in my later years, something that I hope will change in this country. I think the attitude of a lot of the Anglos is going to have to change. First, they're going to have to accept the way that things happened in this country. They're going to have to accept us and quickly for what we are, the way that we speak, our color, our customs. Once they do that, I don't think we will have any problem as a country, because certainly I think that we even try harder to understand the Anglo mentality--their ways and their customs. I think it's going to have to be kind of a mutual respect with each other that's going to solve the problems that we have now. When we have one side obviously trying to change our ways and obviously pointing out that our ways

are wrong, I don't think we're ever going to get any place. I think that the different cultures that we have--the Oriental, the Mexican, the Indian, the Black--each have a lot of beauty to them. If we take that beauty, or all the beauty, and make it into one culture for all in this country, I think then we're going to have a beautiful country.

E: What is your opinion about the Constitution of the United States?

B: It's a beautiful document.

E: Do you agree with the principals it sets forth?

B: Mostly. I would think that if they're followed to the letter, we would have no problem whatsoever. To me, it's just a beautiful piece of paper, beautiful words that are not always followed.

E: Mr. Bencomo, of the Anglo American forefathers or of the founding fathers of this nation on the eastern seabord of the United States, which of them do you admire the most? We're speaking in terms of, say, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton.

B: Lincoln.

E: You don't admire any of the original founding fathers in the 18th century? Those that set forth the political principals of this nation?

B: No, not really. The only one that I can identify with, going back to the Presidents, would be Lincoln. He would be the closest one.

E: In contemporary American politics, which national leader do you admire the most?

B: At this present time?

E: Yes, sir.

B: I still bet on the Kennedys--Ted Kennedy.

E: Mr. Bencomo, when it comes to a question of your patriotism towards the United States of America, what is your comment on that?

B: The only comment is that it hasn't changed much from what I said at the speech at Bowie High School. I shouldn't be treated any different than an Irishman or a Frenchman, an Italian or a Syrian. I think that these things, at one time or another in different areas of the country, happened to maybe Puerto Ricans or Italians or Syrians; I think that it all depends on the area where we live. The Anglo actually wants to control so bad, he wants to have things his way so bad, that he will do anything to destroy anybody that does not want to change.

E: When all is said and done, do you consider yourself patriotic towards this nation?

B: Oh, very much so. I just can't see where I have been any different than anybody else. I'm thinking of our Anglo neighbors. I was in the Boy Scouts for about three years. I went up to Star Scout; then when I was too old for the Scouts when I was going to high school I had three years of ROTC; then I joined the Marines when I was 15 during World War II; then the Navy when I was 16; and then the Naval Reserve. It was a total of about eight years that I served my country, and I thought that that should prove my loyalty. When somebody questions it or tries to turn things around, make it look some other way, I really get angry and I resent it very much because I don't think that my loyalty should be questioned any more than Mr. Smith or Mr. Johnson. If that's not discrimination, I don't know what else it is.

E: Mr. Bencomo, I want to thank you for your graciousness in consenting to this interview and in being so candid. Thank you so much.

B: Thank you, I really enjoyed it.

M: This is a postscript to the interview. We're discussing LULAC and terminology that has been used to define the Mexican American group. Mr. Bencomo, when you first became a member of LULAC, what was the self-referent term that was used by members of LULAC to refer to themselves?

B: It was approximately 1965 that I joined the LULAC council here in El Paso. I used to find out that there was a lot of arguing going on because at that time the word "Mexican American" was just starting to be used. A lot of the LULAC members, including myself, liked the word "Mexican American," and some of the other more conservative members used to think that they should stick to the word "Latin American." I could identify a lot easier and a lot better with the word "Mexican American"--I thought was a better description of what I was. Then a few years later when the word "Chicano" started to receive publicity, we went through that same hassle again. Some of us felt that the word "Chicano" was even a little bit better than "Mexican American" as far as identification. The same people that had been fighting to keep the word "Latin American" were now fighting to keep the word "Mexican American." It's a funny situation. It just shows us how things can change over a period of years. These people in no way want to be called "Chicanos," and yet we're still the same people that we were ten, fifteen years ago.

M: Why did they prefer "Latin American"? That's what they named the organization.

B: I would be guessing that it's being ashamed of what the Anglo community's going to think and what they're going to say, instead of being more concerned about what we are. But I do love the word "Chicano." It brings a lot more closeness to the people. I can

identify with the people a lot better with the word "Chicano," certainly a lot better than "Latin American." Not that I'm ashamed of being a Latin, but the identification is a lot stronger with "Mexican American" or with "Chicano" rather than with "Latin American."

M: Thank you for your comment, Mr. Bencomo.

B: Thank you.