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Interview no. 178

Manny C. Morales

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Manny C. Morales (1929-)
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso businessman and former City Council member.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; educational experiences; business opportunities for Mexican Americans; prominent Mexican American businessmen in El Paso; views on present-day Mexican Americans.

45 minutes.
22 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

E: Mr. Morales, where were you born?

M: I was born in El Paso.

M: In what year, sir?

M: 1929.

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

M: Well, both my parents were born in Chihuahua, México.

E: In Chihuahua City?

M: In Chihuahua City, right. They left México at the time of the Revolution. They came down to El Paso and settled here, and my family's been here ever since.

E: Could you tell me what your father's occupation was during this time?

M: He died rather young, but when I was 10 or 12 years old, I remember he was a fruit dispenser. In other words he worked with a produce company and he would deliver fruit and vegetables to all the outlet stores.

E: And your mother, was she a housewife?

M: She was a housewife.

E: Could you tell me how many children there were in your family?

M: My mother had thirteen originally, but only seven survived.

E: In other words, several of them died in infancy?

M: Yes.

E: Could you tell me something about your early years in El Paso, Mr. Morales?

M: I was born here in El Paso and I've been reared here. I went to elementary school and high school here.

E: Could you tell me something about your elementary schooling? Where did you attend?

M: I attended Zavala Elemenatry there on Hammett Street. It's still there. This North-South freeway kind of cut off a little bit of it, but it's still there. I went there through the sixth grade and then I transferred over to Bowie Intermediate. At Bowie, I graduated in 1948, and then I attended the University of New Mexico on a football scholarship.

E: I'd like to ask you something about your elementary schooling. Do you remember any teachers or authority figures, whom you recall especially well, that might have had a positive or negative influence on your life since your early years?

M: The only one that I recollect with any real impact on me was Mr. Whitaker who is now the Superintendent of Schools here.

E: Was he a teacher or principal?

M: He was a PE. coach at that time, when I went to elementary school. I remember several of the teachers, and particularly a teacher by the name

of Mr. Spoke who had some affect on my outlook.

E: During the time you were in elementary school, could you always handle English fairly well?

M: When I was in grade school, I knew what the teachers were talking about because of what I picked up here and there, but I couldn't speak the language with any fluency at all.

E: So you spoke mostly Spanish?

M: Oh yeah.

E: Would you say this was true of most of your fellow students at that time?

M: Sure.

E: Were most of the students Mexican American at Zavala?

M: All of them were.

E: Can you recall ever experiencing any ethnic discrimination as a child at that time?

M: No, I never did really experience it because we stayed in our area of the city and never had any real need to go out and mingle with anybody else.

E: Could you tell me where you attended high school again?

M: Bowie High School.

E: Bowie, of course, at that time was exclusively Mexican American?

M: True.

E: By the time you had gotten to high school how could you handle English?
Had you improved any?

M: Yes, I had improved some by actual practice. But there's where I feel that the impact of the school teacher helps, as far as your outlook in life and your wanting to improve yourself is concerned.

E: So you think it was in high school that you were inspired a little more. Do you remember some of the teachers that might have inspired you at that time?

M: I remember them real well. There was a Mr. James Burton who was the one that had the greatest impact on me as far as me wanting to improve myself. He was the Speech teacher. He was the one that really worked with me, talked to me, and counselled me in what to look for, what to expect.

E: Do you think he influenced many of your other fellow students?

M: He sure did. He was a good teacher. He's dead now, but he was terrific. Another teacher that had an inspiration on me was Mr. Hilbert Polk, who is now Assistant Superintendent of Schools. He was another person that really took the interest and time to help on his own. Those teachers were a real inspiration for me.

E: It's very interesting. Were most of the teachers at Bowie at that time Anglo American or Mexican American?

M: Well, I'd say that 90% of them were Anglo. There were very few Mexican

American teachers at that time. As a matter of fact, I only remember one, Mr. Paredes, right off. He was a football coach.

E: While you were going to high school, how would you characterize the socio-economic conditions of most of the kids you attended school with?

M: Well, we weren't so poor that we didn't have anything to eat or wear, but we didn't have any money to spare.

E: What years did you go to high school at Bowie, Mr. Morales?

M: I started in '44 and I finished in '48.

E: You started toward the end of the Second World War?

M: Yes.

E: How would you characterize relations between the Anglo American teachers and the Mexican American students generally?

M: In 90% of the cases, I would say that of the teachers that were there at Bowie at that time, the relations were good /between them and the students/. There were some, as it's understood, that were there just for the job and that was it. But I'd say the majority of them really had an interest and wanted to help.

E: Mr. Morales, you were an athlete in high school, is that right?

M: Right.

E: Could you tell me what sports you played?

M: I played every sport, but the ones that I really participated in all through

high school and college were football, boxing, wrestling, track.

E: Did you achieve any real degree of proficiency in these sports?

M: Well, I think, Richard, that whatever I've done and whatever I've accomplished up to now, I owe to my athletic ability. If it hadn't been for that, my parents couldn't afford to send me to college. I think the athletic prowess that I had was what actually carried me through and offered me the opportunity that I needed to move on.

E: Most of the young people of your age who may have left El Paso or at least gotten out of the lower middle class socio-economic group, do you think they were able to do it through athletics?

M: No, as a matter of fact I don't think that that's the case at all.

E: You don't think it was a major thing?

M: In my case, yes.

E: In other words, you consider yourself an exception as having gotten out through athletics?

M: Right. Whereas others didn't have the athletic ability that I had at that time, but had other things.

E: For instance?

M: Intelligence and the wanting to succeed, the wanting to improve themselves and better their family. I can think of quite a few that did that. Athletics didn't help that much at that time, as far as others are concerned.

E: Did many of the other students about your age go to the Army when they

graduated from high school?

M: No, the war was over when we finished high school. There were some that went in the Army before, but I wouldn't say that there were that many that went afterwards.

E: Most of the students that went to school with you at Bowie whom you recall, what general kinds of work are they doing today?

M: Well, at the time that I graduated there was about 240 some-odd graduates. I'd say that out of that group, only about 8 or 10 of us went to college, and not that many finished. Some of them dropped out. But in my business, in the insurance business, and also with the position that I held with the city, I find that a lot of those people have accomplished quite a bit by themselves without having had college education. [It was] just by the fact that they wanted to improve themselves, and by gosh, they want to get what's best for the family. One thing that I've noticed is that the majority of those people have their kids going to college. This is one thing that I'm real, real pleased about.

E: That's very interesting. Mr. Morales, you went to college at the University of New Mexico, is that right?

M: In Albuquerque, right.

E: How did you get up there? How were you able to gain the means to enter school?

M: I got an athletic scholarship, a four-year scholarship from the University,

and that's the only means that I had. They paid for everything--my room and board, my tuition, my books, everything.

E: Did you finish school at the University of New Mexico?

M: Yes.

E: What was your degree in?

M: I had a major degree in Physical Education and a minor in Speech.

E: Mr. Morales, what kind of jobs have you held since being a teenager?

M: Well, there's been several of them. I was a roofer's helper--helped put up roofs; I worked at Peyton Packing Company as a meat boner; I worked at the Popular as a salesman; I worked at O'Shaughnessey's Cafeteria as a dishwasher when I was in grade school; I was a swimming pool guard; and various other jobs.

E: What do you consider the most important job that you've held since your early adulthood?

M: The one that I really had the most to do with me not wanting to be one is roofer's helper. That's a tough job.

E: So you consider it important in that it took you away from the physical labor, it inspired you to do something else?

M: Right.

E: That's very interesting. I'd like to get into your area of expertise--

the insurance business. How long have you had your agency here in El Paso?

M: Going on 14 years now.

E: Would you say that the majority of your clients are of a particular ethnic background? Are they Mexican American in the majority?

M: Well, I don't know whether they're a majority or not. I've got quite a few--a lot, as a matter of fact--Anglo Saxon people insured with me, and a lot of Blacks. But I would say that the majority of them are Mexican Americans.

E: You are very well known here in town as an insurance man. To what do you attribute your success?

M: Let me tell you, before I came into this business, I was a teacher. I taught for ten years. Athletic achievements in high school and in college helped me to get my position and business started. I feel that I owe it to that, plus the fact that I can get along with people; I can talk to any person that would want to talk to me. I feel that I can communicate with people, whoever it is or whomever it might be.

E: Which inspired you the most to go into business here in El Paso--family, neighborhood, school,s or church?

M: Well, I'd say my family did, because I used to be a teacher, and my income then was not enough to really take care of my family the way I wanted to.

This is my whole objective in life, to take care of my family.

E: How many children do you have, Mr. Morales?

M: Four. Three girls and one boy.

E: How old are they?

M: The oldest is 21, then I've got a 19-year-old boy, a 14-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old daughter.

E: The one that's twenty-one, is she in college?

M: Yes, she's attending the Community College. She'll be going to UTEP next year.

E: Do you expect to see most of your children go through college?

M: I'm sure hoping. I've done what I have thought to be what they would need as a help for them to go to college, so it's up to them. I'm not going to force them if they don't want to.

E: But you're going to provide the means for them?

M: Yes, sir.

E: Going back to business here in El Paso, have you ever perceived any basic differences in the manner in which Anglo Americans conduct their business in comparison to the procedures or approaches of Mexican American businessmen?

M: Are you talking about my business or in general?

E: Well, both. First of all, let's look at your business--the insurance business.

M: Well, I don't know whether they perceive their business different than what I do or what any other Mexican American does, but I feel that in our business, it's a competitive business. You've really got to stay on the ball if you want to succeed in this business. Any Mexican American that goes into this business,--I'm talking about my type of insurance, not life insurance-- can, if he's got the desire and the will to want to succeed, operate the same way as anybody else.

E: So, business is business, in other words?

M: Right.

E: Do you feel that the role of the Mexican American in the El Paso area's business community will tend to get larger, diminish, or stay the same in the future?

M: I feel that it's going to get larger. I feel that a lot of us are getting wise. Again, I keep going back to that roofer's job that I had, and a lot of our kids are thinking like that. By gosh, if I can go into business on my own and make life easier for me and my family, that's the way they're going to go.

E: Tell me something with regard to the other businesses in El Paso. Have you ever perceived any difference between the way other Mexican American businessmen operate their business? Is it different from the way the

the Anglos operate it?

M: Well, in a lot of cases, I would say yes.

E: In what respect?

M: A lot of Mexican American business people feel that in order to succeed they only have to cater to the Mexican American, you see, and only cater to one particular group or individual. They don't try to branch out, and you need to, you have to have that. This is my feeling on the whole thing: if we separate ourselves, if we segregate ourselves, then we're not accomplishing what we're setting out to do in life for our people or for anybody else. You've got to have the ability to help other people.

E: In other words, you think people that cater to strictly a Mexican American clientele are restricting their own capacities, their own abilities?

M: I sure do.

E: That's very interesting. Do you feel that business opportunities for Mexican Americans are better outside the El Paso area or inside the El Paso area? In other words, would you advise a young Mexican American about to start off on a business to stay in El Paso, or would you advise him to seek greener pastures?

M: It depends on what kind of business or what he wants to do in life. But I'd say that the opportunity to succeed is good here if you have what it takes.

E: The desire?

M: What you need to accomplish /it/. Like in my business, you take this in California or any place that you go--you know, L.A. or New York or Idaho or whatever--and Mexican Americans have succeeded because they have the determination and the guts to do it. Like I say, my business is a business that is a competitive deal; and if you want to do it, you can do it.

E: But you do think the opportunities do exist here in El Paso?

M: Yes.

E: You are probably as well acquainted with other Mexican American businessmen in this town as anyone. Is there any particular Mexican American businessman whom you particularly admire in El Paso or in the El Paso Southwest?

M: There's several of them. One of them that I particularly admire, because of the way that he has conducted himself in his business and whatnot, is Andy Fuentes. He's with the _____ and he has brought that business up. He has done a great job with it; he has expanded it. I admire him for that, if for nothing else. He really set himself to do a job and he went ahead and did it.

E: Could you name two or three other prominent Mexican American businessmen in El Paso who have developed themselves in this way, who have taken the initiative?

M: Ruben Schaffer is another one that I admire for the fact that he did it himself.

E: What is his business?

M: He's a commercial realtor and he's a top man as far as commercial real estate is concerned here in El Paso and in the state of Texas. Do you know Ruben Schaffer?

E: Yes I do.

M: Well, he's a Mexican American; he's not an Anglo. I admire him because he has accomplished what he has himself, starting from the bottom.

E: What do you believe are the chief economic institutions in this city, Mr. Morales, as far as businesses that have a great impact on the economy of this city?

M: That's pretty hard to pinpoint. But talking from an economic standpoint, as far as the city is considered, I would say that refineries here in El Paso would be, because they hire the most people. If those businesses were to move out of the city... The Smelter [ASARCO], Phelps Dodge, Standard Oil and Texaco hire a lot of Mexican American people, mainly because the work that they do is manual labor work; and that would have a tremendous impact. And it has an impact now because of the economy.

E: Could you name one or two other important businesses in El Paso that you feel provide a lot of employment and a lot of economic stimulus into the area?

M: Farah, the clothing manufacturer, is another one. Construction business, home building has a tremendous impact.

E: How about the El Paso National Bank and the El Paso Gas Company?

M: Well they have, naturally, but I was thinking mainly in the way of the number of people who are employed. El Paso National Bank probably has maybe 100 or 200.

E: And yet their influence is important.

M: Right.

E: Have you ever discerned any friction between Anglo American and Mexican American businessmen in this town?

M: Not to my knowledge--that has been brought to me in that sense--but I imagine that there is. But I've never experienced any. Since mine is a competitive field, I don't know whether it's that or it's something else.

E: What is the basis for your saying that you imagine that there is some friction?

M: I just imagine that in other businesses it might not be the business angle of it, but it might be an ethnic group or personality.

E: In the El Paso business community today, do you consider being a Mexican American businessman an asset, a liability or a neutral factor?

M: No. In my business I would say that it's an asset really.

E: Why?

M: Because I'm bilingual, I understand the feelings of three races. My ability to communicate and express myself to any one opens a lot of doors.

If I was just Anglo or just Black, I don't know whether it'd be the same thing.

E: Mr. Morales, I'd like to ask you some questions about the upcoming Bicentennial--the 200th anniversary of the birth of the United States of America. As a Mexican American having lived here on the Border all your life, what do you think about the founding fathers of the United States? Do you feel any personal identity with these people? Have you admired their ideals?

M: I've always admired the founding fathers but I really never have felt any sense of closeness to them, since this happened at a time when I wasn't around. But I feel that they did a great thing. I think that the accomplishments which they did were tremendous in allowing our country to be as it is now. I've always admired George Washington and all those other founding fathers, but I never have had close feeling.

E: Has being Mexican American had any bearing on the distance that you might feel from those people?

M: I don't think so.

E: You think it's just a time factor?

M: Yeah, it's a time factor.

E: Do you feel that the promises in the American Declaration of Independence (with regard to the rights of everyone to pursue freedom and happiness in this country) and the freedoms that are outlined in the Constitution

of the United States (the rights and privileges of the American people) have been implemented in the American Southwest?

M: I would imagine that without them, we wouldn't have progressed to the point that we have. It would have been much more difficult.

E: You use the word "progressed." Have you ever experienced any discrimination because of the fact that you are Mexican American?

M: Richard, you're not going to believe this, but me personally, no. I never have.

E: You say, "You're not going to believe this" as if it's something unusual. Have you ever seen any fellow Mexican Americans who have experienced it?

M: Well, yes I have, because I've been with them.

E: Could you be specific?

M: I'm thinking mainly of cases that we went through when I was in the Army. But there, Richard, it wasn't so much that they felt that way probably. It was the fact that the people brought it upon themselves to have this brought out; they did things or said things that created it. Things have changed now, maybe, and it wouldn't have so much of an effect. But we were in the Army, we were a minority group, as it was, in that particular company or area or whatever. We all knew how to speak English, we all had gone through high school and some of us had gone through college already, but they never did feel that speaking English would be the thing. They isolated themselves.

E: But you consider language to be important in assimilating yourself into the American society?

M: I sure do. I feel so strong on this that I have brought my kids up speaking English first because I feel that if they can communicate with people, anybody, regardless of who it is or what he does or what position he has, that half of their battle is won. That's something that we didn't have when I was a kid. You're a little younger, quite younger than I am, but I feel that we asked for a lot of the things that were thrown at us because of this.

E: In other words, you think that Mexican Americans should make a conscious effort to assimilate themselves into American society, to learn English for example?

M: If they want to be treated and held in the same esteem as anybody else, yes. I honestly feel this way.

E: Do you place any value on your children learning Spanish?

M: Certainly. I'm bilingual and I think that it's an asset in itself. When we go to a Mexican place or the Mexican country we can speak with them.

E: Do you travel much in México?

M: Not to any great length inside México, but we go to Chihuahua three, four times a year.

E: How about Ciudad Juárez? Would you say you go there quite often?

M: Two or three times a month maybe.

E: How do you feel about your relationship with México? Do you still maintain a cultural affinity, a linking for Mexican traditions or customs for example?

M: I like the country. I think it's a pretty country. I like the people; I think they're nice people, but...

E: You consider yourself basically a United States citizen?

M: Yes.

E: An American in every respect.

M: Right.

E: Do you think your children will become even more Americanized than you have?

M: They probably will because they haven't had the exposure to México that I had when I was a kid.

E: Tell me something. How do you consider yourself when it comes to the question of patriotism to the United States of America?

M: Well, Richard, I was in the Army. I went in and I was willing to go in and pay the supreme sacrifice, if necessary, to defend the United States. I think that it's a great country and I would like to help in any way that I can to make it even better. I think it's my country and I'm proud of it.

E: So you would say that your affiliation with México is basically a cultural affiliation and nothing else? How do you feel about México politically?

M: Well, I had the opportunity to experience that for two years. Like I say, I think that the people are great. I think that our relationship continues to be as close as ever, but politically their ideas are different than ours. They're different than the American political ideas. I believe it seems like that because of the fact that I'm a Mexican American and that I want to think like them but I can't, because I'm stronger on this side than I am on that side.

E: So you consider yourself almost totally assimilated into the United States culture?

M: Yes; that's myself.

E: Do you feel that your family, your children, will maintain the same values, the same attitudes?

M: I've been working towards that objective with them. What they feel and do and say is going to be up to them, but that has been my objective in life --to try to get them to realize that they can get out of life what they put into it.

E: Mr. Morales, what do you want for your children? Are there any particular occupations or what particular status in life in the United States would you like to see your children achieve?

M: You know, Richard, I only have one son and I've got three daughters.

For my son, I would like for him to have the best opportunity business-wise that he can get or that he wants to make for himself.

E: Would you like to see him stay in El Paso, or would you care if he branched out somewhere else?

M: I wouldn't care if he branched out anywhere. I would like to see him stay in El Paso if possible, but if the opportunity is going to present itself or he can make a better living in another area of the state or the nation, it'll be great because it's for his improvement. Naturally, I would like for him to continue in my line of business, but he doesn't like it. He doesn't think that he'd like to go into the insurance business. But he's young yet and maybe he'll change his mind. If he goes to college and finishes, I hope that he continues in the business.

E: So, here in 1975, are you generally optimistic about the prospects for young Mexican Americans going up the socio-economic ladder in the United States?

M: I feel very strong about that, Richard. Regardless of what nationality you are or what ethnic group you belong to, it's up to the individual. It's up to the individual to improve himself, to prove himself that he can do the type of job or all the types of business that he is striving for. Nobody gives you anything. This is my feeling in life. Nobody gives you a darn thing--you've got to work for everything. Something good is always hard to come by, but when you get it, when you strive in it, when you work in it, you can succeed. This is my feeling.

E: So generally speaking, you would advise young Mexican Americans to learn English, to assimilate themselves into the United States culture and not to be so isolationist--not think so much about their Mexican heritage at all times?

M: Strictly.

E: Strictly. And yet to remember it.

M: To remember it, right.

E: That's very interesting.

M: I'll never forget my Mexican heritage. I'm proud of it and I was proud of the fact that my parents were Mexican. I thank them for having me and brought me into this world. I'll never, never renege or deny the fact. I think that's one of the things that some of these people feel, that if you go too far to the other side, that you're going to forget everything else and renounce what you were before. But I don't feel that.

E: That's very interesting. This has been a most informative interview. Thank you, Mr. Morales.

END OF THE INTERVIEW