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Interview no. 187

H. T. Satiesteban

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: H. Tati Satiesteban
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
PROJECT: Bicentennial
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Texas State Senator.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; ideas on bilingualism and biculturalism; discrimination; influential Mexican American politicians; Raza Unida Party; militancy; Bicentennial celebration; cultural problems of Mexican Americans who travel in Mexico; the future of Mexican Americans.

1 1/4 hours.
33 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

This interview is being conducted in El Paso, Texas on the 30th of June, 1975. The subject of the interview is Mr. H. Tati Santi-esteban of El Paso, Texas.

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

S: I was born in El Paso, November the 3rd, 1934, in Hotel Dieu Hospital.

E: Could you tell me something about your family's background, your mom and your dad?

S: I'm a first generation American. My father is from south of Arizona, in the state of Sonora. That's where his people are from. My mother is from Santa Rosalía in México. My father and mother got their citizenship as adults. My father never went to school. My father doesn't know what the inside of a school building looks like as a student. He was never educated in Spanish or in English. My father of course is a Santiesteban; my mother is from the Baca family from Juárez. Her uncle was Lic. Federico Baca. He was the Dean of the Mexican attorneys for many many years in Juárez. My father was raised at a ranch in Hudspeth County, the Fort Quitman Land Co. In those days it was called the Dave Gil Ranch. Dave Gil was a colored gentleman that my dad's people crossed the river in order to tenant farm. Then the crops were washed out and my father's family--mother, father, sisters and what have you--moved back to El Paso, and my father stayed there from the age of seven years until he was about twenty-two years old. [Then] he came from Hudspeth

County and moved to El Paso. That's where he met my mother and they were married.

E: What year did they immigrate into the United States?

S: Let's see, my father was born in 1910; therefore, I assume that my father crossed the river as an illegal alien, as a wet-back, around 1917, 1918 when he was about seven or eight years old.

E: Your mother?

S: My mother crossed as a little girl, too, with her people, around that same time.

E: Through what area did they cross?

S: Through Juárez. Of course my father crossed through Cuervo, through the area that is south of the Dave Gil Farm. The Dave Gil Farm is located about seventy miles east of El Paso, in Hudspeth County. The area on the American side is the Esperanza farm, McNary, Texas, 20 miles west of Sierra Blanca. That's where my father was raised.

E: Did your dad ever mention to you why he immigrated into the United States?

S: No, other than the fact that the Pancho Villa Revolution was taking place. His family decided that they had a better opportunity to preserve the family entity and to make a living on the American side, and that's why they came.

E: Did he come across with his family?

S: Yes, the whole family migrated.

E: Could you tell me how many people were in the family?

S: In those days there was my grandfather, my grandmother, his sister Ester [and] my father. [My father] had seven sisters, no brothers. I think he had some brothers, but I think they died in infancy;

but he is one of eight.

E: So the entire family crossed the river?

S: Well, the entire family that existed at that time. After that there were several others born on the American side.

E: Oh really? How many more?

S: Five more, all daughters. My grandfather was a man that we would say was not only not capable, but not willing to support the family. He ventured through Pennsylvania--at least those are the stories I hear. He went to Pennsylvania, he went to the west coast. [He] abandoned the family and [I have found out through] corroborating testimony that at the age of seven or eight years old my father was supporting the entire family. In those days they had a lot of tenant farming and ranching. The ranchers would hire the family and in turn they would be given a couple of acres of land to plant crops. My father, at an early age of 8 or 9 years old would ride around the water tanks and mow the cockleburs and what have you. In exchange for that, the ranchers would allow the family to live in a little adobe house and plant the gardens. My dad was allowed to have a cow, or milk the cow and go to sell the milk; and that's how they survived. That's without an education. And my grandfather would once in a while come in and impregnate my grandmother and leave again. It's a sort of a standard procedure that my historical investigation has revealed that was quite common.

E: Quite common among other people?

S: Quite common among the sociological element that my father was raised under.

- E: By the time you were born at Hotel Dieu Hospital here, had your family already moved to El Paso?
- S: Yes, my family had moved to El Paso; my mother and father had married. When I was born, my father had opened a service station called "Dante Garage Service Station," that was located on...right now it's Paisano, in those days it was Second Street. [It was] right around the block of Second Street and Oregon. My father was an independent businessman. He had a service station.
- E: What year was this?
- S: 1934. My father was also a professional wrestler in the days when wrestling was a sport and not a gimmick. He wrestled under the name of Ricardo Cortez in the days of Andy Termain, Gorilla Ramos, Black Guzmán. Maybe somebody will remember those names. I still do because I used to see all those gentlemen when I was just a very, very little boy.
- E: In what years was this going on?
- S: This was in the mid 30's, late 30's. My mother had a home on Noble Street. My mother was a beautician. She went through sixth grade and then became a beautician, a manicurist, and a hairstylist. She worked for many years at the White House Department Store. If you will recall in those days only the elite and the affluent and the rich were the ones who went to beauty parlors and got permanents and what have you, so my mother worked many years at the White House Department Store Beauty Parlor. She and my aunt, Rayito Baca, lived together. Rayito Baca would be Lic. Federico Baca's sister. They lived together on Noble Street right across the street from the

Magoffin home. They had a little house there, and that was the first house that my mother and father lived [in when they were married]. I was born when there was some kind of measles or mumps or something going on in that area which scared my parents. They purchased a home in the lower valley at 174 North Awbrey Rd. To this day my parents still live there.

E: So you were raised in the lower valley?

S: I was raised in the part of El Paso that they call Ascarate.

E: Would you tell us something about growing up in those early years?

Something about your elementary schooling and recollections in general.

S: Well, yes. I went to Winchester Cooley School. That is on the corner of Alameda and Awbrey Rd. It was not an incorporated part of the city in those days. When I was growing up, I had a home. [We had] three acres of land. I was raised just south of the tracks. North of the tracks was the San Juan area. There are very humble Mexican people living there. My grade school was completely co-mingled. It was probably half Anglo, half Mexican. The only recollections I have of those days [is when] I went to grade school. In those days they used to segregate us. They used to put all the Mexicans in one first grade and all the Anglos in another first grade. The idea then was that none of us could speak any English. That was true in my account. I couldn't speak a word of English before I went to school. As I recall, I was enrolled and I was put in with the Mexican children, and three or four days later I came home and I had lice in my hair. My mother, all four feet eleven inches, ninety-two pounds of her-- which is exactly what she measures right now--took me to the principal. In those days it was Mrs. Nell Whitaker. She told the principal

she didn't want me to be in there with those dirty kids. In turn then, with pressure, I was put in the first grade with the Anglo children. That was where I met Judge Sam Paxson, who was my lawyer, who is now a district judge. That's where I met Wesley K. Martin, who is now my law partner. That's where I met Jesse Whittington, who was an all pro for the Green Bay Packers. That's where I met a lot of people that I'm still associated with, and we've been best friends since I was five years old. Then we were all integrated again in the third grade. The reason I bring that up is because now, through my education and what have you, I see where those initial years of segregation have told on a lot of my colleagues and maybe even me. The great injustice that's done to kids that are supposedly Americans that are segregated because of the language or cultural obstacles, as they put it, can be an element in your future. For example, I see people that I knew in grade school who are doctors, engineers, contractors and professional men and women [who] to this day they have a lot more accent than I have. My home was completely Spanish speaking, just like their home; but yet it's the impact that you have in those early years, that you are not allowed to participate with others where you can learn and where you can pick up the language just like all of us had to do.

E: Your English is extraordinarily good. Could you tell me when you started achieving a certain amount of fluency in the language?

S: I can't. I don't remember. I think a lot of my social impact, or shall we say being co-mingled with English, was that my mother, consistently and constantly in my early years used to tell me, "You are a Mexican; and to be equal you must be better." I thought

of that; I've always been conscious of that. When the kids would go to school, they would be wearing T-shirts and levis. I wasn't allowed to wear T-shirts. I had to wear a nice shirt. I was fortunate. My father and mother, although not making money at all in fact, [gave me] a good family life. I had plenty of acreage to play in. I had basketball goals. I had my own horse, several horses that I used to ride in kids' rodeos and parades like all my other friends did. I took piano lessons. I started taking piano lessons when I was five years old. I have had about nine years of piano, about six years of voice. My mother and I would take the bus from the lower valley to El Paso [and] take the street car from El Paso to Juárez so I could play in concerts and have piano lessons. My father would come in late at night, take a shower, and get in the car and go over to Juárez and pick us up so we wouldn't have to take the street car back. We did this every week for close to nine years. I am my father and mother's investment. I do not ever recall my father and mother going to a restaurant without taking me. I don't ever recall staying with babysitters. I don't ever recall them being gone without me. Then eight years later my little sister, Monica, was born. She was raised the same way. Every cent my parents had, they bestowed it on their children.

E: Would you characterize this as extraordinary or unusual?

S: I've been an attorney for fifteen years and handle twenty divorces a week; I would characterize it as very extraordinary in the way they felt about their family. My mother and father are still together. Everything I have, every ambition that I have, every tangible asset that I've accomplished, every cultural background, everything that I possess, I owe to my mother and my father.

E: So you see your family as being the biggest influence in your life?

S: There is no question about it.

E: Could you tell me about your high school years here in El Paso?

S: Yes. I had a very good youth. I was an athlete. I was President of my high school Freshman Class. I was Vice President of my Sophomore class. I lettered in all sports. I was Vice President of the Student Body. They elected me "Cutie Boy" of Ysleta High School Student Body. I was "Most Popular." I was Honor Roll; I always made good grades. I had a very, very nice upbringing. I had a very nice high school life. I have nothing but fond memories of my high school and grade school.

E: Looking back at your grade school and high school years, are there any teachers or authority figures who stick out prominently in your mind, who may have had a particular positive or negative influence on your formative years?

S: Yes. I didn't go to kindergarten; they didn't have kindergarten in those days. I can think of my first grade teacher, Mrs. Askew, who I think was more than patient with me, and more than tolerant, and more than kind in seeing that I participated and belonged to the rest of the social environment that was in the first grade. I can think of my eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Wells, who did things above and beyond the call of duty of teachers. She used to read us classics; all of us would look forward to going to school because she was going to take 30 minutes and read the next chapter of a certain book, Moby Dick, The Yearling, Billy the Kid--books that we would look forward to. I can see the principal of my eight years

that I was at Cooley School, Mrs. Nell Whitaker, who was an extraordinary teacher. In those days the teachers didn't even have to be certified, but yet it seems that their non-certification more or less stimulated them to be other than just putting in their seven or eight hours a day. They went above and beyond; it was really a magnificent type of grade school education. I can see now that [it] had a lot to do with the foundation that I and my colleagues accomplished.

E: Did you have any Mexican-American teachers at all?

S: None at all. I cannot recall ever having a Mexican-American teacher in my grade school, high school, college or law school.

E: Did you have jobs when you were going to school?

S: Yes, I've always worked. We had the Ascarate Street Department. My law partner's father, Mr. Lee Martin, was mayor of Ascarate. We would work filling up the holes. I guess the most extraordinary job I had was during the summer when we all worked at the Pacific Fruit Express. That's what we called the ice docks. Many of the high school athletes would get jobs at the Pacific Fruit Express. I also sang at the Guadalajara de Noche in Juárez, which is a high class whorehouse; it was right across from the Fiesta. I used to sing there. My mother never did know until later. I used to sing and introduce the strippers and the floor show in Spanish and in English. I did that for a couple of summers. I would handle anything that would pay a buck.

E: That's very interesting. After you got out of high school what did you do, Mr. Santiesteban?

S: After I got out of high school I immediately entered college. I went to New Mexico Military Institute. The Korean War was going on then.

My mother wanted me to go to N.M.M.I. in my senior year in high school, because she was afraid I was going to be drafted. I've never checked to see if it was true or not, but around 1950, 1951, the talk around town in those days was that if you were a Mexican-American you would be called before anybody else to go to the Army. So my mother, being a beautician, learned a lot from her customers, from the affluent people in El Paso who would utilize her services. She had heard about New Mexico Military Institute and wanted me to go [there]. Of course I refused to go. It was my senior year in high school, when I was in all of my splendor with all the honors and athletic activities and the girl friends and what have you. Then in the Fall of 1952, after I graduated in May, I requested and [was] granted an athletic scholarship to New Mexico Military Institute. That's where I went to college.

E: Could you tell me something about your experiences there? Did you enjoy it?

S: Oh, yes. It was an excellent school. It is a very prestigious school. It was three years of high school and four years of college. Of course I went there my four years of college. I played all sports; I boxed, and I played basketball, and track, and football. In my freshman year my leg and my knee got hurt, but they kept my scholarship going. They called it a grant-in-aid. I made good grades, so it was easy for me to keep my scholarship. I then became a cheerleader.

E: What was the ethnic composition of N.M.M.I.?

S: That's interesting. I'm glad you asked that. New Mexico Military Institute is located in Roswell, New Mexico. All of us through the years believed that New Mexico was very oriented towards the Spanish-

speaking. It is, but in a different category than we classify it. The school was founded in 1892. There you don't go through class offices; it's rank. It is like the Army. You are either Corporal, Sergeant, Colonel, Major, or what have you. As soon as I entered that school, I looked into the background. It just goes to show you the subconscious, or maybe [the] conscious. I saw that there was never a Mexican, with a Mexican surname, that had ever reached the rank above Cadet Captain. I told myself then that I was going to do it, that I [was] going to get better than Cadet Captain. And yes, I was. I was Cadet Colonel when I graduated. You rarely found Mexican Americans at NMMI in my day. You find people from South America, from México, from other parts of Latin America. Rare is the occasion that you find Mexican Americans. I can recall that in my freshman class there were two of us, and all of us were athletically oriented. There was a boy from Las Cruces, there was a man from Albuquerque already there; there was one from Alamogordo and one from Carlsbad. But in my class there was just two of us.

E: Of those that were there, in retrospect what do you think their identification was with the Mexican part of the Mexican American? Had they assimilated themselves into Anglo American culture?

S: I don't know if the word "assimilation" applies or not, but they were not at all versed in the Spanish language. They were conscious and proud of their ethnic origin. But they were not comfortable at all speaking Spanish or being around their colleagues, with the Mexican Mexicans. They all accomplished; they all graduated. They all became regular Army officers, just like I did. In fact, of those that I started with, one right now is a doctor. He teaches

at the University of New Mexico. The other one is a coach, teaching in the northern part of New Mexico. Of course, I am an attorney. I can't think off hand, but they were outstanding individuals. You must understand that they were athletes. In all modesty, they didn't reach the ranks I did. I don't know why; maybe I just had a little more ambition or more gall.

E: How was your Spanish at that time?

S: I've always been very comfortable in Spanish. When I was growing up my mother insisted that I read the Continental. I wasn't allowed to say "hijo, que agüite", or "simón", or any of those slang words. I'd get slapped right in the mouth. My mother was just very conscious of that; she would not allow me to say what in those days we called "pachuquismos".

E: Do you maintain that bilingualism today?

S: Oh yes, I feel extremely comfortable in Spanish or in English. I like to think that I can make a speech in Spanish or in English or in whatever dialect "de la jequia" or like they talk in "West Texas." Maybe it is just me, but I do feel that I have that confidence in myself. I'm very comfortable speaking in any language.

E: How large is your family?

S: I have a daughter that just turned seventeen, I have another daughter that just turned fifteen, and I have a little boy that's going to be ten years old this coming month.

E: Do you stress bilingualism or biculturalism with them?

S: I try. I of course stress biculturalism, but bilingualism is nearly an impossibility. My wife is Anglo, although she speaks Spanish; she is the former Sue McMillan of Roswell, New Mexico. We will be

married 19 years this coming December. My daughters are excellent students, they're nice kids. They've never given me one iota of trouble. I told them that I would buy them a car if and when they convince me that they speak Spanish without an Anglo accent. Both of them speak Spanish, both of them understand it, but when they speak Spanish they sound like an Anglo speaking Spanish. It is just nearly an impossibility for them to retain their accent and their knowledge of the Spanish language in the environment that we live in.

E: Where are they being educated?

S: My daughters go to El Paso High School. They went to Mesita Grade School. We live in Mission Hills, 601 La Cruz.

E: Do you expect to see them go to college?

S: I sure do. I expect that they will go to college anywhere they want to go. I think that my children are entitled to the benefit of what their father's education can afford. Within reason, I hope to send them anywhere they want to go.

E: Mr. Santiesteban, what did you do after you graduated from NMMI?

S: I was a regular Army Officer. I went into the Service. I became a paratrooper; I was an airborne, I was a ranger. I think I was a good officer. I was told that I ranked the highest in a class of what they call Officers Efficiency Index, O.E.I., of all the Second Lieutenants that went in the Army. I enjoyed the Army, I loved it. Of course with a military school background, you know you always enjoy that which you are good at. Taking orders from people that I knew were less competent than myself didn't bother me. That is why I believe a lot of your regular officers--your ROTC graduates--leave the Army, because of the fact of rank. They can't quite make

themselves take orders from people that they know are less efficient than they are. And of course, that is your rank. I liked the Army. I thoroughly enjoyed it. In fact, I was going to stay in as a career officer, except that since I was six years old I have always wanted to be a lawyer. I requested a 2 year leave without pay to allow me to go to law school, just to keep my date of rank going. I figured I could go to law school for two years, finish somehow, and then stay in the Service as an attorney. But in those days they didn't have that program, so I resigned my commission after three years and four months and I went to law school.

E: In listening to your story, which to my mind is a very extraordinary one in comparison to the ones I've been listening to, I'm struck by the fact that you have led a very happy life.

S: Oh, yes. I cannot complain. I thank God for the life that I've led. I have no chip on my shoulder; I led a very good life as a young man, and I'm leading one now. I like my life now. I take my job seriously but I never do take myself seriously. I get angry; I get depressed; I get disappointed. A lot of that comes from my own people that lead me to that depression, to that disappointment. Sometimes it's so unfair, yet maybe it's a lack of education. Maybe a lot of it is my own fault. But thank God that's why I am in politics. I like to be in a position where I can do something to change; whether it's for the good or the bad, I don't know. At least I'm in a position where I can do something tangibly and effectively as distinguished from sitting around hitting your head against the wall and complaining and griping. That's the only reason I'm in politics.

E: I am not trying to ask a leading question, but have you ever experienced any ethnic discrimination?

S: I suppose I have, but I was aware of it then and it didn't bother me. I suppose there were several girls that would not date me because I was a Mexican; those same girls would meet me after the dates, though. I recall Ysleta High School went to play Big Spring one time. The coach allowed us to go to a movie. We went into a theater and they pointed to where it said: "For Colored Only." I sort of led the pack and I said, "We're not colored and we're not going to go upstairs." So they refunded our money, and the mayor of Big Spring came and apologized later, explaining why. I won't go into that explanation, but at the time it seemed reasonable. I can't say I've ever been refused service. I can't say I've ever been refused a job because of my ethnic origin. I really have not been discriminated upon, not directly. I'm conscious of the thing; I'm fully aware of it.

E: But you've tried to overcome it, is that the point?

S: Oh, yes. I don't think it's a question of trying to overcome it; I think I have. I've always argued that we Mexicans don't have a color problem. Our problem is a language problem. I've always believed that I have more than the Anglo. I've got two languages, two cultures; I've got passion, more ability to hate and to love; more rhythm. That's my mission, that's my job, to convince my people that they have more. When you walk into a place with an aura of confidence and with certain certificates suitable for framing backing you up, then I think we have a lot more than the average Anglo. It sounds immodest, but it's the truth.

E: Where did you go to law school, Mr. Santiesteban?

S: I went to the University of Texas at Austin.

E: Did you enjoy it?

S: Oh, yes. I enjoyed law school. There again, I became President of the Student Body. I became President of the Mid-Law class. I think in those days we had seven Mexican Americans in the class. Those were exciting days. When I was President of the Student Body, the Blacks began to integrate the dormitories.

E: What year was this?

S: 1961. We had a lot of racial strife and a lot of racial problems. It was very exciting, and I learned a lot of politics in those days.

E: How many Mexican Americans had been in your position at that time, as President of the Student Body?

S: Well, that goes to show you; I was conscious of the fact that I thought, "I'm qualified and I'm confident and why shouldn't I be President?" I ran for office and I got elected. I'm advised that I'm the first. I think now there's been a couple of others since those days. But you know, they built that Hemis-Fair in San Antonio, and there they have the Institute of Texan Cultures. I was very surprised when I walked in one day, and they had Outstanding Mexican Americans, people who had accomplished something. My picture was there. Of course, I thought it was because I was elected as a member of the House of Representatives, and what have you. But there were others that were Mexican Americans whose pictures were not there. So I inquired, and I was told that the reason my picture was there is because I was the first President of the Student Body [at UT Austin] that was Mexican American. That's the reason for my picture, which I think is a little silly. It was no big deal. If they've got to

go that far down to find outstanding Mexican Americans, well then we do have problems.

E: The general feeling that people have when Austin, Texas is mentioned is that there are bigots out in that part of Texas, and that a Mexican American from El Paso would not be comfortable in that kind of environment. Precisely how did you perceive the environment in Austin back in those days?

S: I think there are bigots everywhere. I think there are bigots in Hondo, I think there are bigots in Las Cruces, I think there are bigots in El Paso, I think there are bigots in Waxahachie. I think there are bigots everywhere, and with all probability there will always be bigots. Fully aware of that knowledge, and fully aware that wherever one goes there are going to be bigots, that overcomes the problem by 90%. Personally, I didn't see any bigotry. I was already married, I already had a child; my second child was born in Austin. I didn't have any money. My father sent me a hundred dollars a month, and I worked at the Law School Library for 80¢ an hour of which I got more than \$200 dollars a month. That's a lot of hours. I got along fine. My wife never had to work. We had little savings because I saved all my airborne pay when I was in the Service. So we had about \$3,000 in savings. I wasn't entitled to the GI Bill then; now I am. Now I can go become a brain surgeon and get the GI Bill. I was not entitled to the GI Bill then and I didn't have any problems. I am not aware of anyone of my ethnic origin who had any problems, that were my classmates. Paul Moreno and I started Law School together. Paul Moreno was one of my campaign chairmen when I ran for President of the Student Body. We were very close friends.

I can think of maybe four or five others that were Mexican Americans that were in our class.

E: Where were they from?

S: One was from Dallas, two from McAllen, Texas. I just don't remember. I'm thinking about Tito Torres; he was from McAllen. He is an outstanding attorney now in that area. Herb Porras from El Paso was a senior when I was a freshman. Eddie Márquez was there. He was ahead of me in school. I think Paul Moreno and I were the only two from El Paso that started. I think that's about it. I know that in my senior year there was a fellow by the name of Phil Juárez who was there; he was an Austin man. There was another fellow from Dallas who started, but that was when I was already a senior.

E: What did you do when you got out of Law School?

S: I came in with my partner Sam Paxson and started practicing law immediately. You know, that's the sad thing about it; I like to tell this story. The first airplane I was ever in, I jumped out of. I was a paratrooper. The first time I ever saw the inside of the capital of Texas--now remember, I went to Law School there--was when I went to find my House seat after I was elected to the House of Representatives. The first jury trial I ever saw, the first court room I was ever in, was the first jury trial that I myself tried. I just never had the time for on-the-job training. I just never had the time to observe and to see and to appreciate. I hire a lot of kids now to assist me, to run errands around my law office in the capital. I just never had the time to do that. I was always either working or going to school, taking care of the family, and that's it.

E: Do you see this as desirable? Would you advise other young people to do likewise?

S: No, of course not! If they can see and feel and touch and taste some elements of whatever profession they are going into, of course I advise them to do so. In my case it didn't create an obstacle to me--at least I don't think it did--but I certainly would like to have had the opportunity to see what it was all about, before you had to do it yourself.

E: When did you begin to get interested in politics?

S: The first time was when I was in the second grade and I played "Rhapsody in Blue" on the piano at a PTA meeting. I stood up after I got through and I heard applause, and I loved it. I thought, "This is nice! This applause is nice." I've always been interested. I've always liked the idea of being Class President or Vice-President. I've been involved in politics all my life, of course in different categories; but I've always liked politics. I've always liked to participate. I've always liked to be involved.

E: In the category which you are in right now, when did you begin to get interested?

S: When I thought I had a chance to accomplish this goal.

E: What year was that?

S: As a Senator? That was when Joe Christie decided to run for Lieutenant Governor. That's when I decided to run for State Senator; and everybody else did, too.

E: How long have you been in office, Mr. Santiesteban?

S: At the end of this term I'll be in ten years. I was elected in 1966. I served six years as a member of the House of Representatives, and

at the end of this term I will have served four years as Senator.

My term expires this coming year. I have to run for re-election in 1976.

E: Are you going to?

S: I am going to run for re-election, yes.

E: If you were to be asked to name who the most important or influential Mexican American politicians in the state of Texas are today, could you give some names?

S: I think by far my shining light, the man I look up to more than anybody else that's Mexican American, is Congressman Henry González from San Antonio. I think that Raymond Telles, the former mayor of El Paso, was an outstanding man.

E: Which others do you consider as currently being of influence, or people to be looked up to in Texas politics?

S: I think one of the most influential, intelligent men...Let me put it this way. If I were Governor of Texas, or "President of the World," or if I were in some big-deal political office, I would like to have at my side this fellow from Laredo, Texas: Honorel Ligarde. I think he is an outstanding human being.

E: What makes him so outstanding?

S: He is just intelligent, he's knowledgeable, he has his feet on the ground, he knows the poles, he's not angry. He appreciates both cultures, he understands the problems of both cultures, he understands ignorance. He's patient, he's honest. I just think that he is, by far, the man that I can personally relate to in a personal capacity. He was my roommate for many years while we served in the House together. If I ever have a serious problem I would certainly solicit and seek his advice.

E: Anybody else?

S: Of course, every Mexican American who has been appointed or elected to office, in my opinion, has to have those prerequisites that I call ambition, gall and guts, and the desire to serve mankind. I would put them all in that category. You asked me who I thought were the most outstanding, and off the top of my head I can't think of anybody else. Certainly [I admire] Senator Raul Longoria of McAllen, the other Mexican American who is a member of the Senate; Roy Barrera of San Antonio was Secretary of State; he is an outstanding criminal lawyer. Of course I respect him along those lines because that is what I am; I practice criminal law. He was defeated when he ran for mayor of San Antonio, but I think he is an excellent statesman and a very competent man.

E: Are all of these people your friends?

S: I know them all. Ligarde and Longoria are close personal friends. Henry González I just know from afar. I've shaken his hand and I've talked to him a few times. I would like to consider him my friend, but I don't know if he would agree with me or not.

E: Would you like to be Governor of Texas?

S: Oh, yes. I'd like to be Governor of Texas. I'd like to be U.S. Senator. I certainly would.

E: Are you going to make attempts towards that end?

S: Of course, we have dreams.

E: Dreams sometimes become reality. Does your vision encompass this kind of thing? If all of a sudden it were to become feasible for you to run for Governor of Texas, would you?

S: Certainly I would. Assuming that I get re-elected in 1976...of course, you can't assume anything in politics. You see, your state-wide offices are all four year terms now. In 1978 is when all the state-wide offices become open. So under our law, I could get re-elected as a State Senator in 1976, run for a state-wide office in 1978; and if not being successful, I could still retain my State Senate seat until 1980. That's that LBJ law that we passed several years ago to allow him to run for President and not give up his U.S. Senate seat. But you see, people just don't understand. I was talking to Jerry Apodaca who is a good friend of mine, by the way, from twenty-five years ago. Jerry was telling me and was complaining that he spent over two hundred thousand dollars getting elected. I got to thinking, "My goodness! Lloyd Bentson to get elected U.S. Senator spent 3.2 million. Dolph Briscoe, in his first race for Governor, spent over 2 million dollars. I myself, getting elected to the State Senate, spent right [around] eighty thousand dollars." New Mexico has barely a million people. Texas has thirteen million people. There is just no comparison. I represent right now as a State Senator four hundred thousand people. That's nearly half of what Jerry Apodaca, the Governor of New Mexico, represents. Texas is just a hard nut to crack in a state-wide race.

E: What do you think about the Raza Unida Party?

S: I think Raza Unida is needed in its own element, but it's prejudicial to the Mexican American candidate who is Republican or Democratic. You see, I have supported Raza Unida. I believe Raza Unida is needed in races for Commissioners Court, for County Courts, for Alderman, for municipal offices, for Justice of the Peace, for municipal offices. I think they're

needed in the area of Alpine, Marathon, Van Horn, Fort Stockton, Pecos, and in the Lower Río Grande Valley. But I do not appreciate Raza Unida because it's prejudicial to the Mexican American who is seeking a district office, a state office, a senatorial office; because the power as itself does not allow you to get elected. It just doesn't happen. Others will disagree, but in my opinion, accomplishing the goal is more important than attempting to accomplish the goal. [That] is important too, but not as important as getting there.

E: In other words, the votes have to cross ethnic barriers.

S: They certainly do. In El Paso County, you have fifty-seven percent Mexican-surnamed population. Let's say we have four hundred thousand people in El Paso County. Fifty percent [is] Mexican-surnamed; still, we barely have one-third of the vote. It isn't because a lot of Mexican Americans don't register; that's part of it. It is because we have so many resident aliens who have been here for years and years and have never become American citizens. If you run a race strictly [along] ethnic lines, you are to get defeated.

E: Let's look at the practicality of this. Say we do have fifty-seven percent Spanish-surnamed in El Paso. Of that fifty-seven percent, what percentage are American citizens?

S: I don't know. But I'm telling you that if we have fifty-seven percent Mexican-surnamed, logic would tell you that we ought to have fifty-seven percent of the vote; but we do not. We barely have thirty-three percent of the vote, Mexican-surnamed. Why? I don't know why. I say that the reason we don't have it is not only because some of us don't register to vote, but because some of us cannot

register under the law because we are not American citizens. In the lower Río Grande valley you have eighty-five to eighty-seven percent Mexican-surnamed. When it comes time to vote, you have eighty-five to eighty-seven percent of the vote, too. In El Paso that is not true. Assuming you were to run a complete Chicano, Mexican-oriented type of racism campaign, you would not get elected; not county-wide. Now you might get elected in certain districts and that kind of thing, but you're not going to get elected county-wide. Secondly, I wouldn't run a campaign that way even if I would get elected. I think it's defeating the purpose that we're here for. I'll not ever prostitute my own philosophy. I'm not married to any political party, but I am married to my own philosophy; and my own philosophy is that of co-mingling and integrating as distinguished from trying to stay aloof and trying to stay "ethnic," let's put it that way.

E: What do you consider to be your political power base?

S: I've been asked that question before and I don't know how to answer it. I suppose my moderacy is my political power base. This last election in 1972 [included] ex-Senator Frank Owen, who we know is a very conservative individual, and Representative Paul Moreno, who we know is a rather liberal individual. In all the precincts that Paul Moreno carried, I placed second. In all the precincts that Frank Owen carried, I placed second. Then I carried my own share of precincts. I suppose I am a lot of people's second choice, which is a good way to run for office. Being a moderate is a lonely existence, because you're not really pleasing either side; but you're not making either side angry [at] you.

- E: There are some people that are angry at you, though. These are the more radical Mexican Americans in this town.
- S: There's people who are angry at me, and those are the more radical Mexican Americans and the more radical conservatives. They're angry, and I learned many years ago that you just can't please everybody.
- E: Let's talk about the radical Mexican Americans. What are your thoughts on their criticism? I'm not asking you to answer it, but why do you think they are criticizing you for such moderacy, for not being more vociferous in pursuing the "Chicano cause," as they call it?
- S: I guess I know why they are criticizing me.
- E: Why?
- S: You just said it, because I'm not vociferous and because I'm not leading the wagon. I think the way to accomplish what they call the "Chicano cause" is my way and not theirs. You see, in the Texas Legislature--in the element that one is in--I am not a masochist. I am not one who will get up and make speeches merely for the sake of getting press. I don't need that for my ego. I don't need anything for my ego. I know what I am and I know what I stand for. In the Texas Legislature, speeches are made for only two entities: the gallery and the press. [In order to pass] that which becomes law, you must have the ability to convince seventy-six out of one hundred and fifty House members to believe the way you believe. You must have the ability to convince sixteen Senators out of thirty-one to believe the way you want to believe. Take it from me, you don't convince them by speeches.
- E: So you think the more activist one is, if he is a politician in Texas politics, the less he is prone to get done?

- S: The less he is effective; that's true, whether to the far left or to the far right. Of course, the activism calls attention; it makes the people aware. They're already aware. My forte is accomplishing what the activism is all about.
- E: There are some people who would argue, however--and this is not talking about politics, but rather about the entire civil rights movement and the Chicano Movement, if you will--that "the squeaking wheel gets the grease," and that there were a lot of people who weren't aware of ethnic problems before people started parading through the streets and putting up posters and shouting at the newsmen. How do you feel about that?
- S: "The squeaking wheel gets the grease," but there are squeakers and there are those who grease [the wheel]. I grease it. After the squeak comes in and after the awareness comes in, then I come in with the grease and get it done. I'm not branded.
- E: Not to strain the metaphor, do you think that perhaps the squeakers served a purpose?
- S: Certainly. There's no question about it. Militancy has a purpose. That's what I said at the offset of this last parallel; it serves its purpose. The militants and the noise makers, they're the attention getters; but then the solving of what they are trying to solve by the militancy [has to be done by] the moderate going in there and solving it. That's the political reality. You've got to have the gift of hypocrisy to pass or to kill legislation. I'm sorry to say this, but you cannot do it on merits; it just is not done. Because people in east Texas, in north Texas, in mid-Texas, could care less what problems we have; and yet we don't have the majority. Therefore

we have to use the other talent that God gave us in order to accomplish it around the back door. I think I'm very effective, and very proficient in doing that.

E: Do you think that it's the nature of Realpolitick that you and the activists have to be on different sides of the fence?

S: No, because I don't think that we are on different sides of the fence. That is why I'm telling you that many times I become depressed and disappointed. We're really not on different sides of the fence; we just try to accomplish our goals in a different manner. Yet, I can show you--you can see, the record speaks for itself--the accomplishments that people like myself have done as distinguished from [what] the militant, either right or left, has accomplished. I am talking about recent history, of course.

E: This is an enlightening part of the interview. I'd like to go into another phase, into the final phase, now. Here in 1975-76, this nation is observing its Bicentennial, and there are several celebrations planned. There are references made to "our forefathers," Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and so on. I'd like to ask you, as a Mexican American in 1975, how do you identify with these people? How do you relate to the American Revolution?

S: I've been reading in the paper about the Bicentennial, and I just can't get excited. I'm sorry. Parades and bands are enjoyable and that's nice. I like to see the drum majorettes and their short skirts; and I like to see the nice floats, and it's all nice. But I can't get too excited other than in the social vein. I'll go see the parade. If they want me to ride in the parade, I'll certainly ride in the parade; but I can't get too excited about it. I will participate,

time allowing, but I'm more interested in getting things done.

I'm more interested in accomplishing more scholarships. I'm more interested in getting better roads. I'm more interested in building better schools. I'm more interested in getting more people educated. I'm more interested in seeing that the standard of living, that the opportunity is there. I'm not too interested in the Bicentennial.

E: How do you relate to the ideas of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence?

S: Of course, my education has allowed me to relate, because I know about George Washington, and I know about Thomas Jefferson. But how did I relate whenever I went to the Crawford Theater and saw Gene Autry? We would go home and play the game. I couldn't relate to Gene Autry; I don't look like Gene Autry. But then they finally came through with Zorro, so that gave me something to relate to. I get to thinking that "our forefathers" crossed in the Mayflower. Then I think, my forefathers were over there on the Mexican side killing Spaniards! That's where my forefathers were. But I say, "That's fine. 'Our forefathers.'" We're supposed to say that.

E: Do you think the Anglos consider those people--Washington and Jefferson--to be the Mexican Americans' forefathers, intellectually or otherwise?

S: If they do consider them to be the Mexican Americans' forefathers, they're stupid, because they're not the Mexican Americans' forefathers. They just happen to be those that allegedly conquered a nation, or created a nation, that we just happen to live in. Many of us were here before them. Not my people; my people were not here before them. My people were all south of the Río Grande. But history will tell us that a lot of us were here before they came. What did we become?

We became a conquered nation. But I suppose we had a choice. We could have moved south of the border; I don't know. I don't know choices I would have made in those days. But it just doesn't bother me; I don't think it's important.

E: Do you think you maintain a cultural affiliation of sorts with México?

S: I don't think there's any question about it. I've worked at it. I want to maintain a cultural affiliation with México. I think that not maintaining a cultural affiliation with México is what creates a lot of the frustration that we're in. I'd tell a little story, but I don't know if we've got the time to hear it now.

E: Sure we've got time.

S: I'll tell the story about Benny Martínez. Benny Martínez's people crossed the river during the Mexican Revolution. They were humble people in México, and they decided to settle in Dallas. That's where Benny was born. Right away, that tells you something, because his name is Benny instead of Benjamín. He grew up in Dallas; he went to school in Dallas, he went to high school in Dallas. He graduated from high school. "Ya terminó la escuela." Well, he's through with school. That's a concept that we seem to have, that you're through with school when you get out of high school. I criticize it, but it's true. So, Benny became a Dr. Pepper truck driver; and Benny's boss is Bob Smith. Bob Smith believes that because Benny Martínez's name is Benny Martínez that Benny knows how to translate documents, he knows how to interpret, he knows about Montezuma, he knows about Aztlán, he knows all about Benito Juárez, he knows everything there is to know, because after all [his name is] "Benny Martínez." Benny Martínez doesn't know jack, because at the schools Benny went to, they never taught him anything. His parents couldn't teach him

anything because they didn't know anything. If they had been landed gentry and people of culture in México, they wouldn't have come to this country to begin with. They would have stayed [in México]; they would have had it made. So they came here like every other American did, to find a better way of life. So now Benny Martínez and his wife go on vacation and they go to Acapulco. Benny Martínez looks like you and I do, Richard; they're dark. Obviously they're not Norwegians. So Benny and his wife are at the Acapulco Hilton. In the first place, they're driving a brand new Mercury, because here under the credit system we can buy a new Mercury on credit. Benny has good credit because he works for the Dr. Pepper Company. He pulls up in front of the Acapulco Hilton, and next to him is this very big shot Mexican Mexican, who is driving a Mercury, too; but it's a '72. So this big shot Mexican looks over at Benny Martínez and says, "Well, who's that low class son of a gun who's driving that big car?" It hurts him, [because] after all in México to own a '75 Mercury you have to pay 100% duty. So only the real biggies are the ones that drive the big cars. Benny looks at this guy and thinks, "Why is he looking at me ugly this way?" But of course, there you have your jealousies. So they're getting ready to order [dinner]. Benny Martínez wants lobster and wants the waiter to undercook it. How does he order it? I wonder right now whether you would know how to order lobster in Spanish and tell them to undercook it. So he asked for it in his broken Spanish. The waiter immediately thinks, "This guy is a 'pocho.' He has forgotten the mother tongue." But yet he goes up to the Anglo people who are sitting there, and the Anglo people say, "Quee-arrow oonuh long-uh-steena y quee-arrow quay no la co-sa

tahnto." That's charming, because the waiter says, "Oh, beautiful. These Anglo people are trying to learn my language." Then he waits on them a lot more efficiently than he waits on Benny Martínez, because Benny Martínez is a "pocho." The real tragedy comes when they start driving back, and they break their windshield. They go up to this garage man and they want [him] to fix the windshield. How do they ask the guy in Spanish to fix the windshield? "Quiero que me arregle el winshil." Who knows what parabrisas is? What school ever teaches you to say windshield in Spanish? So, they don't have a good time in México; they were discriminated [against] in México. Now they come back to Dallas. Where is their country? Benny Martínez speaks "Englich thees way." Then he speaks Spanish bad, too. There is where the Chicano element comes in. That's where I believe that it all gets started, because of the lack of education; not only [not] telling Benny Martínez who he is, but [not] telling Bob Smith who Benny Martínez is. That's why the bilingual, co-mingled with bicultural, education is the answer, I think, to a lot of the Mexican American problems that we have. I don't believe it's got too much to do with the political arena unless it's to effectuate that program that I'm telling you about, that I call bilingual and bicultural. Then, of course, it is political power. I believe that there is that entity that exists all over the United States, especially in our Southwest, regarding the Mexican American identity; the idea that we cannot relate to the mother country [and] we cannot relate to our present country, because of our language barrier, not our color. They who we live with cannot relate because of their lack of bicultural education. I tell that story merely to make that point. I've seen it and I've witnessed it; I've felt it. I see the discrimination

that our Mexican Americans go through in México, and I see the discrimination that our Mexican Americans go through in the United States. This is where I believe the Chicano Movement all got started. I don't like that name; I might as well go into that. I've been asked by some Mexican Americans, "Oyes, Tati, ¿eres mexicano o eres Chicano?" That's divisive, that's unfair. I don't like the idea of the "Blacks" and the "Browns" and the "Whites." That's offensive to me; it's more divisiveness. I don't think it's correct, I don't think it's proper. I think it's demeaning. We do not have a color problem. We have never had a color problem. Now that we're bringing in this "Brown" thing, and this Chicano thing, I think it's divisive, wherein the opposing political forces look down and they laugh. They say, "Look at them. They're fighting among themselves. As long as we keep them fighting among themselves, then we're in good shape." There is no way that you are going to convince my mother or my aunts or the people over thirty that they're brown, because through the years, they have never had color problems. They've had language problems, education problems; but not color problems. I just don't think it's proper. As long as I'm in a position to say that, that's what I'm going to say.

E: There are people who have made the point that it was the Anglo that originally started hyphenating. It was the Anglo who started saying, "Those people are 'Spanish-surnamed Americans' or 'Mexican-Americans' or 'Hispanic-Americans' or 'Latin-Americans.'" Those same people say, "If the Anglo saw fit to make that distinction, it is with pride that I am going to make it known." What is your thought on that?

S: Oh, that's silly. Who cares where it all got started? Who cares if the Chinese were the ones that called us that, or the Arabs? It

doesn't matter. The descriptive phrase--Mexican-American, Spanish-surnamed, Latin American--by itself does not bother [me] because we've got to have some kind of a description.

E: But Chicano is the one that you...

S: I think the distinction between Chicano and Mexican-surnamed Mexican-American, that there is a difference between the two, is where it shows divisiveness. It limits our stroke, our power, because there is no difference between being Chicano, Mexican-American, Mexican-surnamed, Latin American. There is no difference at all. As long as it's all in parity, then that's the way it should be. My argument is that there are those who are trying to distinguish between the two.

E: I would just like to end the interview by asking you what you think the future of the Mexican American is with regard to power in politics, or with regard to economic advancement. Do you see it as improving significantly in the next decade, or do you see it as a very long range case?

S: Richard, I think that we're going to be suffering from a backlash within the next five years. I believe that the press, the media, has been somewhat unfair in bringing forward items where we are witnessing an anger--"reverse discrimination." Although I don't believe it exists, I think the populace as a whole is being notified that it is there. So, I believe that within the next five years there is going to be a backlash. I further believe that our duty, the duty of the Mexican American leaders--political, business, or otherwise--is to try to establish laws that will protect our ethnic group from that backlash when it comes. When that backlash comes, I think that we will be in a parity with all other citizens in protecting our heritage as it

involves society, business and economics. From then on, the way that we will go is strictly up; because I think that we will be educating ourselves [and] we will be educating others about ourselves. I'd like to close this interview by telling you that in my forty years of life, I have found very few cruel people. People are bigoted or prejudicial because of ignorance. I think human beings are basically kind, are basically good. I think that it's background, environment, education, or lack of education that makes people bigoted. I think that once we overcome that through education, at least through a revelation of what it's all about, we are going to move a lot farther. I think that my children and your children are going to see more opportunity than other children have seen. I've seen more than my father has seen. I think we are on our way up.

E: Thank you, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW