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## **Interview no. 194**

Drusilla Nixon

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Drusilla Nixon (1899- )  
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John and Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: Bicentennial  
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Widow of Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; experiences of blacks before desegregation; the Mexican and black communities in El Paso; El Paso compared to other parts of the United States; her husband's career and his civil rights suit; Lord Beresford and Lady Flo.

1 1/4 hours.  
32 pages.

## BICENTENNIAL

J: This is an Oral History interview with Mrs. Drusilla Nixon of 7900 Parral Drive, El Paso, Texas, December 11th, 1975. Interviewing are Sarah John and Oscar J. Martínez.

To begin with, Mrs. Nixon, could you tell us a little bit about your background--when and where you were born?

N: I was born in Toledo, Ohio, before the century. I was educated there in the public schools and started in the university there; and then the flu epidemic came and they closed all the schools. That's the famous flu epidemic in 1918, and during that flu epidemic I was offered a job in Atlanta, Georgia. I took the job and I wasn't there to go back to school when they opened again. I worked in Atlanta, Georgia, with the American Missionary Association and I was stationed at a Congregational Church which was then (I suppose still is) the largest Black Congregational Church in the world.

J: Could you tell us a little bit about your parents?

N: Yes. My father was a mulatto. His mother was a free woman. I don't know why the family was free--only that they had come originally from Virginia with the first group of people that came over and settled Kentucky. And I read Elizabeth Maddox's book about the settling of Kentucky. It's called The Great Meadow. In that [book] she tells about the eighteen families who came, and one of them was the Joe Tandy family. That was my maiden name--Tandy. My father's father was a very prominent lawyer in Kentucky, which was the custom then. Now we

don't know anything about it, but in those days in the South it was a custom that most families had two families--one Black and one white. Very often when young men got to be 18 or 20, the parents would give them a slave. That was so that when they did marry, they would marry the young woman they preferred. So it was a custom then. For a long time my aunts would always say, "Don't tell anybody." But it was nothing to...it was a custom that we had. We had slavery, and this was one of the things that came out of slavery. So his mother had five or six children by the same father, this lawyer. I'll show you my aunt's picture. I don't know whether I have my father's picture or not, but they looked Irish, and their mother was a brown skinned woman. I didn't know her because she was dead before I was born, but I knew her sisters and they were all very beautiful, high cheek-boned people. When I was 16 my father took us back to Kentucky to meet his family and that's the first time we had met them. They lived just on the outskirts of Lexington and out at the back gate there was a cemetery there, which was the Tandy cemetery. All of that old generation then were being buried in that cemetery. But my mother was born way up in Michigan. Her father, my grandfather--he died since I've been living in El Paso--was an Indian. I knew [my mother's people] better than I did my father's people because they lived in Maslon, Ohio, and my great-grandmother was born at Mt. Vernon in Virginia. Her parents were of mixed blood--that is their mothers were Black and their fathers were white. Her father was free and he was from Washington, Pennsylvania; and he went down to Mount Vernon and married this woman and they had two children--a boy and a girl. The boy's name was Henry.

We always, when we were little, heard about Uncle Henry. He was the famous one in the family. He bought his wife and these two children from the Washington family. They went back to Washington, Pennsylvania, and that's where my grandmother was reared. He bought his wife and the little girl. Her name was Amelia, my great-grandmother. The boy ran off and went with John Brown; and when they caught John Brown, he escaped and went to Philadelphia and shipped out on a ship going around South America to the gold fields in California. I have here--I might show it to you before you leave--a brooch and earrings for pierced ears, and they're made out of gold that he got in California. The gold is like gold wires and they're wrapped around coral that came from the Gulf of California. My sister has silver spoons and she also has a long gold chain that he sent back to his wife in Detroit. She lived in Detroit when we knew her. She was one of the charter members of Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science Church in Boston.

J: You have a very interesting family.

M: A very varied background.

N: Yes. We knew my great-grandmother well because [when] we lived in Toledo we went to Maslon, which was 185 miles (the same as going to California nowadays) to spend the summer with her. She lived on a farm. She was a remarkable little old lady; I guess she must have been 70 or past when we knew her because she was 99 when she died. I was 23 when she died, so we knew her very well. She was very well educated--read all the time. She was a very tiny little woman, but she must have been very capable because she operated this small farm by herself. She hired help, but she operated it. That must have been the only income she had. They raised hogs and then, I guess,

they raised feed and stuff in the field; and then she had a barn-yard garden and chickens and stuff like that. The reason she was by herself, her husband got the urge to come out West and prove up on some land out here and she wouldn't come. She said, "We own this farm and I'm not going to leave it for something we don't know anything about." So he came out here and he proved up on the land, 360 acres I believe; and he was to go back home, but the day before he was to leave he got pneumonia and died. So she never saw him again.

J: So she stayed in Ohio?

N: Yes, but she had a daughter living out here in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and two sons that followed their father out here. They were cowboys. They lived for me to know both of them. One was a very handsome man. I thought a cowboy was going to be rough-and-ready [type]<sup>?</sup> and swear and drink and everything. They sent me to the station when he was coming back home; he hadn't been home in about 30 years. My mother just remembered him as a little girl. We had never seen him. They sent me to the station to meet him and I didn't see any cowboy get off the train.

M: You were surprised?

N: Yes. I didn't see any, so after the train had been in a long time I went back home to tell my mother he wasn't on the train, and there he was--a very handsome man just beautifully dressed!

M: Mrs. Nixon, when did you first come to El Paso?

N: The first time I came was in '29.

M: I'd like to ask you about your impressions when you first came to El Paso.

N: Well, I looked out the train window and I saw these little one-story houses. The train was a Golden State and it passed over there on Montana. You know where the train track crosses Montana down near Cotton? I thought, "Am I going to have to live in one of these little tiny houses?" Back home we had two-story houses, and I had been living in Philadelphia a while where we had three-story houses--three stories and a basement. They just looked like little doll houses to me. When I got to the station, someone had given me the name of a woman that would rent me a room (I came for my health). She lived on Tornillo Street, down there in Second Ward. When I got in the taxi the man said, "Where shall I take you?" I said, "To Tornilo." He said, "Oh yes, Tornillo." [Laughter] So then, when we drove up in front of her house and I looked at it, I thought, "How in the world can I live in that house?" It just looked like a little toy house. But she was a lovely person--she was a widow. She belonged to the Second Baptist Church and I went to church with her, and then she belonged to several clubs. She belonged to one club, the Phyllis Wheatley Club, that I belong to now and have for forty years. After a while I just got used to El Paso and I loved it. Then I went back East and then I came through here going out to the West coast. I thought, "Who in the world do I know in El Paso that would meet the train?" I wanted to see somebody. So, when I was in Kansas City, we had about a half hour [lay-over]<sup>7</sup> in Kansas City. So I sent a telegram to my doctor and I said, "I'm passing through El Paso at midnight and would love to see somebody. Tell somebody to come down to the station." When the train stopped he was at the station. So I went down and

stood on the platform and talked to him, and when I went to get back on the train he handed me a box of candy. When I got back in the train and I opened the box of candy, his picture was on top of it. So that started the romance.

J: That's very interesting!

M: He was your doctor when you first came here?

N: Yes.

M: How long were you here that first time?

N: Let me see. I came the 23rd of October in 1929 and I was down here when the awful Crash came, the beginning of the Depression. I stayed here about 18 months I believe it was, and then I went back.

M: Were there many Black Americans here?

N: No, there were about 800.

J: Where did they live?

N: They lived all over. They weren't in any one section. They lived all over.

J: How did they fit into the general society at that time?

N: Well, they didn't. They would have; but my husband used to say that if El Paso hadn't been in the state of Texas that they wouldn't have had any segregation laws. But as it was we couldn't go to any shows and we, of course, couldn't go to any restaurants. You couldn't even go to Liberty Hall--nothing! They were entirely separate, just entirely separate. And, of course, they had a separate school. They had from 8th through high school.

J: What school was that?

N: Douglas School. Both [of my] daughters graduated from Douglas and Dr. Nixon's son finished there. My oldest daughter went to Talladega College. See, they had to go away to school, so I sent her to



Alabama to Teladida College, and she finished there. One of her teachers was from Yale so he encouraged her to go to Yale and get her Master's degree. So she went to Yale and got her Master's in nursing. Then the boy went to the University of California at Berkeley. Then my daughter who lives in Albuquerque finished from UTEP by the time she was ready to go out there. But before that, before '54, those teachers at Douglas used to stop teaching in the afternoon and then drive up to A & M at Mesilla Park in the evenings to night school; and then in the summertime they'd get up at 4:00 in the morning and drive and be up there for 7:00 classes. They'd drive right by UTEP and have to drive up there. There were about 18 of them one year who got their Master's degrees up there.

M: You say there were about 18 Black teachers there at Douglas. What about white teachers?

N: They didn't have any white teachers there. They had an entirely Black faculty--principal and all. I think they had about 26 when Edna went to school there. Edna went to school there until desegregation. By that time we had moved to Ysleta, so I went over to enter her in Ysleta High School for her senior year. Mr. Hanks told me that they weren't taking any Black students yet until they found out how some case was going to come out that they had at Sherman, Texas. So, then the only thing for me to do was to send her back to El Paso to school. I tried to get her in the closest, which would have been Jefferson--[it] was the nearest to Ysleta. But she couldn't go to Jefferson. They said they couldn't take any students outside [the district] or something like that, and she'd have to go back to Douglas. Well, by that time Douglas had so few high school students that I was concerned. Every child had to take

every class in order to make a class, cause there were so few of them. And you see, most of her class had been scattered out-- some were at Bowie, some were at Jefferson, some were at Austin, and all around. So my next-door neighbor out here at Ysleta was very concerned, and so she called Loretto; and they said, "Send her to us." So that's how Edna happened to graduate from Loretto.

M: You say some of her friends were scattered out? The other high schools were taking Black students?

N: Yes, that was when they desegregated.

M: After '54?

N: Yes.

M: Was there any effort on the part of the Black community to desegregate back in the '30s when you first came here?

N: No. I don't think anyone tried. You know, they talk about bussing now. These children...take Edna, for instance. She would have come all the way in on the bus to school and paid her own bus fare. But during all the time that the schools were segregated there were children who lived out there near Lincoln School--you know, way out toward the cemetery. They had to go to school; little bitty six-year-olds either walked all the way down to Douglas (you know where Douglas is) or they rode the street cars. We had street cars then. No one ever paid their bus fare. There wasn't anything said about driving them. The only children that got there in a bus were the Fort Bliss children. They sent them in a bus, but the other children either walked or came on a street car. Edna came in every morning with her father when he came in, and then she'd come home on the bus. She did the same when she went out to UTEP till we got two cars.

- J: Can you tell us a little bit about the social life in the '30s and '40s in the Black community at that time?
- N: Yes.
- J: Since it was segregated at that time, what kinds of things did you do?
- N: Well, we entertained in our homes and then the clubs; if they had something they could go to Douglas School and have their dances in the auditorium.
- J: So there were social clubs at that time?
- N: Oh yes. This Phyllis Wheatley Club has been here since 1914. Then there were several other clubs, and they would give things every now and then. Then people did a lot of entertaining in their own homes. We always went over to Juárez to the picture shows. Lawrence would take one night a week off and take us over for dinner, and then we'd go to the show.
- M: Was it different in Juárez for Black people going over there? Were they accepted?
- N: Oh yes, [but] not all over. Now, [in] some of the very exclusive places, I don't think we were accepted there. But you take the restaurants up and down 16th of September and . There were one or two restaurants where we just went all the time because we knew we would be well treated.
- M: Because of your light complexion, were there times when you could go into places where no other darker people could go?
- N: Oh yes. I was almost tempted to go out and go to UTEP, but I was scared and I knew my husband wouldn't like it. But, oh yes. I'll tell you what we used to do. Now we bought Concert Association tickets over in Juárez for all of the concerts they had over there

for years. And then, you know, you can use a Concert Association ticket in any city where you are. So sometimes there would be something over here that we really wanted to see, so I would go into the door and I would watch for the lady; I won't call her name, but anyhow she had charge of the concerts here for years and years and years. She always stood right inside the door watching everybody that came in. I would go and stand and wait until she had turned her back or gone someplace, and then I would beckon and we'd all go in and go upstairs in the balcony, and she wouldn't see us. I remember we were up there one time, and a friend of mine, Mrs. Coats-- she just died recently--was right behind me and she said, "Hey, Mrs. Nixon. How'd you get in?" But we did that a good many times if we could get in. Or we'd go after the lights went down and go upstairs in the balcony.

M: Did anybody make a fuss?

N: No, nobody ever made a fuss. And my husband was brown. I don't see how he could have passed for anything else. Now the children, we might have gotten by, but we did that for a long time.

M: Were you ever refused service in a restaurant?

N: I never tried to go. Now, if I were going to be downtown a long time and I would have the children, I would fix sandwiches and we would do our shopping then go back to the car and sit in the car and eat our sandwiches. Or--now, this is real crazy--I could go in Grants on Mesa and on one side they had a restaurant where you could sit down at tables and eat. Then right in front as you went inside the front door they had a counter where they had hot dogs and hamburgers; and we could stand up at the counter and eat, but we couldn't go over on the other side and sit down.

J: So there was no place in El Paso that...?

N: Oh no. And I'll tell you, the YWCA conducted a survey, and the women went out to all the different restaurants and asked would they open their doors [to Blacks], and the only one that said that they would was Luby's. The only place my husband would ever eat afterwards was Luby's because they had said yes. The question was [would they allow Blacks] in with a group of white people. I'll tell you what happened to Edna. Edna and one other girl--the girl was a very beautiful girl, but she was dark skinned and had beautiful hair--and one boy were in the UTEP band, and they played for a football game at Phoenix. And on the way home they stopped at Bisby or Benson or someplace there to eat. And of course, there were professors and their families -- along with them. There were about 2 busloads or more, maybe. Anyhow, they walked down to this restaurant and they all went in; and when Edna and Maxine got there, there were many [others] ahead of them [who] had put their orders in. When [Edna and Maxine] sat down to the table, the waitress came to them and said, "I'm very sorry, but we don't serve Negroes in here. You'll have to leave." So they got up and started to leave, and as they went through the door this boy was coming in. And they said, "Oh, don't go in there. They just told us to come out, that they don't serve us in there." So the three of them walked back to wherever the bus was. Well, nobody said anything. They turned around and looked and they saw everybody coming out of this restaurant. Well, the next day in the Music Department on the bulletin board was a big sign and it said, "For sale. Thirty fried chicken dinners and so and so," because they had walked out. They had all ordered and refused to eat and came out. Those are some of the things we go

up against. I'll tell you another thing. You know when they had these drive-in theaters, when they first built them, we said, "Surely we can go in a drive-in. We'll be sitting in our car just like we are on the street." So we came out here to the Bronco and there was a big line of cars there. Just as we got up to the ticket office the man came up to us and said, "You all can't go in. You'll have to go on out." Well, we had just come back from two months in New York, and, of course, in New York we went to the opera and we went to the theaters and saw all the shows. The kids started crying, "What's the matter with them? We went to the show in New York, why can't we go in the show in El Paso?" And it was hard to tell them why not.

M: What did you tell them?

N: I don't know what we told them; but they cried. They wanted to see the show. So then, the next time we went to this show over here on Chelsea. You remember where the Senior Citizens' place is? That was a drive-in theater.

J: It's the Del Norte, I think.

N: Yes, one of them. So one night we went there and we got our tickets, and were going through the drive to get into the place and we turned around and looked and I said, "Oh, Lawrence, here comes a man running." Here he was just running after us. And I said, "Get in, get in, get in the dark and he can't find us." And sure enough, we got in the dark and he couldn't find us. There were too many cars, and so we got to see the show then. But experiences like that, when you look back on them now they look funny and you can laugh over it, and you can see how ridiculous they were. Now the one where you could go was up at the Fiesta, up there on Mesa, and we used to go up there.

M: That's a relatively recent one though.

N: No. That was one of the first ones. I think the one up on Mesa was the first one.

M: When was that built?

N: A long time ago.

M: Late '50s?

N: Oh, no.

M: Early '50s?

N: No, my children were little.

M: Really? Before 1950?

N: Oh yes. I'm pretty sure.

M: I didn't realize it was there that long.

N: Yes, it must have been before 1950 because Edna is 36 now and 20 years ago she would have been 16. It was before that because she was young. We never had any trouble up there, never.

J: Right after the desegregation laws were passed, where did you feel you wanted to go? Was there any place where you felt you had to go now that you could?

N: No, but you remember that El Paso had a desegregation law. I was on that committee and, let's see, the Mayor was Mr. Williams I believe-- not this last Mr. Williams, the Mr. Williams that used to teach out at UTEP. I better not say that because I can't remember now.

M: What year was it? We can identify him.

N: I think it was before the big segregation. It must have been '53 or something like that. But Ted Bender was on that committee, and Albert Schwartz was the Chairman. Burt Williams was on that committee and Orba Lee Malone. Well, anyhow, the lawyers on the committee wrote the desegregation thing, and it said that no one was to be denied attending shows and eating in restaurants and that sort of thing

because of color. And, oh, it was a big to-do! They had to have meetings in Liberty Hall because so many people came. Everyone talked pro and con. So finally, whoever the Mayor was said that if it passed, he would veto it. Ted Bender was going off on his vacation and he said, "Mr. Mayor, if you veto this I will fly back from my vacation to vote on it again." They were to vote on it that next week. And sure enough, he vetoed it; and sure enough, Ted Bender came back! And it passed. Of course, everybody thought there was going to be a terrible rush of people in the restaurants. We had been without restaurants for so long that it just didn't interest us, not like that. But it was so good and it has been so wonderful to walk in a restaurant and know that you can order a meal just like anybody else. I've never heard of anyone having any trouble at all.

M: There was also the situation with the busses--Blacks couldn't sit in the front.

N: No.

M: How did that go?

N: Well, street cars were the same way, when we had street cars. If you had to use them, which I did once in a while, you'd just go sit in the back and get mad all the way down the aisle, because very often there wouldn't be any vacant seats back there, but there would be plenty up in the front. But you couldn't sit down. Now, I'll tell you, when I came out here in the middle of the Depression to get married, I came on a bus. And, of course, when the bus leaves St. Louis, the Blacks are supposed to get in the back and sit on the round seat (you just jump all the way all the time), and maybe the first couple seats ahead of that. So, I didn't sit on that back seat, but I sat in the back in one of those back seats there. When



we got to Joplin, Missouri, everybody got off the bus for breakfast. There was a very nice-looking young colored woman on there with a small baby. So, I didn't know any better. I said, "I'm not in the South yet." But when we got off there, I went right on in the restaurant with the rest of the people and had my breakfast and when we came back on the bus I said to her, "Weren't you hungry?" And she said, "Oh yes." And I said, "Well, you didn't eat any breakfast." And she said, "Oh yes I did." I said, "I didn't see you in there." She said, "Well, they told me to go in the back door," and they fed her in the kitchen, which is the usual thing. So, I said, "Why did you eat? How could you eat? If you had just told me I could have bought some sandwiches for both of us." But I didn't know that you were supposed to be segregated there. But, anyhow, after that I didn't eat any place. When they got off at Dallas I went in some place and bought a bag of sandwiches and brought them on the bus with me from Dallas [to] here. When they got off at Van Horn for a meal to eat--and I remember so well, this restaurant was all glass--and they all went in there, the tables were right up there by the window. I said, "I'm just going to walk up and down." And I walked up and down that sidewalk the whole time they were stopped there. When we got back on we were on that back seat. Well, that evening someplace there in Kansas or Arkansas, some young white women got on with some children and they walked right back there just as big as anybody and said, "Get up and sit in those seats up there. We want to put our children to bed on this seat." Now, you know, that's what happened in Montgomery. The Blacks filled the busses up from the back, and the whites from the front. Well,

they filled the bus up, and this Rosa Parks was all right. But, when they went farther and the Black people were getting off and left some empty seats back there she was supposed to get up and just move back, keep moving back. She had worked all day and she was tired, and she didn't--she just sat there. And when they asked her to move back she didn't move; and that's what started the whole thing. When the bus was filling up you waited until all the white people got on and then you got on. And often it would be so crowded by that time, you'd have to go along through them getting to the back unless it was a bus with a back door.

M: Did any whites sit in the back once in a while with the Black people?

N: Oh yes. And then, you know, during the War the soldiers--Black and white--refused to pay any attention. They used to take the little signs down. You'd get on [the bus] and the signs would be down. And once and a while there'd be a little flare-up. I remember, we lived there on Myrtle, and one night I think there had been some kind of dance or something down at Liberty Hall. Well, right in front of our house there was some trouble. It was over that kind of thing. Then, here's something that happened during the War that was bitter. Fort Huachuca [Arizona] was where all of the Black soldiers were. The Army was segregated, too. All the Black soldiers were stationed down here at Fort Huachuca. If they came in on the Missouri Pacific, they would have to get off at the Union Station and wait until a Southern Pacific came through. And so, they got off and they had to be fed. When they took them to the restaurant to feed them, they had to go around and go in the kitchen; and they had tables and counters and everything there for them where

they fed them. Well, while they were eating there they looked out in the restaurant and they saw some German prisoners of war eating in the restaurant. And there was quite a to-do in the paper about it.

M: Do you remember the year?

N: No. It must have been something like '43.

M: Was there a fight?

N: No, no there wasn't any fight. But it was just bitterness.

M: Verbal protest?

N: There might have been. There might have been.

M: Well, those are some experiences! How did you feel at the time with all of these things going on?

N: Well, you know, there's nothing you can do about it. You discuss it and it was all you talked about when people got together and talked; but there really wasn't anything we could do about it. You were helpless and so you just went ahead. Any place that there was anyone trying to change things, there was always trouble. You know they had that terrible riot in Tulsa, and during the War we had some very bad riots down here in Port Arthur and some of those cities along the Gulf coast. My husband's lawyer --the same lawyer who took this case--said to him, "Get rid of all your property but what you're living in because this thing is going to be like a snowball, and you might have to leave suddenly." At the time I packed a little satchel with cocoa and food like that and stuck it in the closet. I said, "If we have to run fast I can snatch this up and we can get out on the desert someplace." The only thing happened was the mice got in it! [Laughter]

M: Would you say that El Paso was no different than other Southern cities?

N: No. It was different.

M: It was different?

N: It was much better here, much better than in other cities. I remember a woman who moved out here during the War. She was from some little town in East Texas and she said, "Oh my. This is wonderful." You'd have thought we had all kinds of freedom here the way she felt about it.

M: Why did she feel that way? What was the difference?

N: I'll tell you. You know, back in some of those towns you couldn't raise your voice about a thing because if you did, you'd get lynched. That's how my husband came to El Paso, because of a lynching right in front of his office. He just packed his things up and came out to El Paso. That was the first of January, 1910.

J: Where was he then?

N: At Cameron, Texas. When I was a little girl up in Toledo, just most any time that you picked up your paper you could read where they had lynched a Black person or several at a time. So you just didn't fight against [it]; you just couldn't.

M: What made El Paso different in that respect?

N: Well, I think probably one thing was because people were here from all over the country. It wasn't an old-time Southern town where they had been used to complete separation. I think probably that was it. And you know, in most places you had to live in a ghetto, but not in El Paso. People back then didn't. There would just be blocks where there'd be one or two Black families maybe, and they just lived all over El Paso.

M: Were there certain neighborhoods that they couldn't live in though?

N: No. There were certain neighborhoods where you had trouble buying; but if you could buy a house and move into it I think you were all right. I remember some people that lived way up Piedras and I didn't know any...it was just that one family way up there. Then all out Gateway East--Gateway East was Manzana Street then--and it was a very mixed neighborhood. Probably the only place there weren't any was maybe Kern Place or out there where they couldn't afford to buy any houses anyhow. But even today, you know, in a lot of cities there's trouble about buying property. But I've never known there to be any in El Paso. When we first moved out from El Paso into Ysleta we bought a very beautiful piece of property. It was four acres with a pecan grove. There's an old adobe house there and we built around that old adobe house. All the time we were thinking, "My, my. When these people discover who we are, are we going to have any trouble?" You know, you had that kind of feeling. So we were just about to finish the house and the telephone rang and the woman said, "Is this Mrs. Nixon?" I said, "Yes." "The Mrs. Nixon who's building a house on Pendale?" I said, "Yes it is." And I thought, "Here it comes, here it comes." And she said, "Well, I'm your next-door neighbor." And I just held my breath. And she said, "I'm calling to tell you how glad we are that you're going to be our neighbors." And she just talked. And really, when she finished talking, the tears were just rolling down my cheeks. I couldn't believe it. We moved out there and they were the most wonderful neighbors anybody ever had. They were just wonderful. They still are. We call on the telephone if she sees something on TV or if a mockingbird gets in her [yard]. She used to call me at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, "Drusilla, do you hear that mockingbird out there in the tree?"

J: What was the relationship between the Black community and the Mexican American community, if there was one?

N: Well, all I can say is from the relationship that we had and my husband had. His practice was almost entirely Mexican.

J: Did he have any Anglo patients at all?

N: Oh yes. He had Anglo patients. We used to say it was the United Nations in his office. He had quite a few Philipinos. The relationship was just marvelous. Of course, he was an unusual man. He was very kind and good and he loved people; and he loved his practice to the point that the doctors would say to him, "Dr. Nixon, you ought to go up on your prices. If you'd go up on your prices you would make just as much money as you do now but you'd work less." Because he worked very hard. He'd say to me, "Now if everybody gouges these people, they'll never have anything. We have all the things we need and some of the things we want, so I'm going to stay right here." Now, he's been dead 9 years. The most he ever charged was \$2 for an office call and \$4 for a house call. And he made house calls.

J: That's unusual.

N: He never went up, never. He said to me, "Why should I go up on my prices when they don't allow me to belong to the County Medical Society?" So he said, "I don't need to follow them."

J: You mentioned earlier that you were involved in the desegregation movement here in town. Was that for the school?

N: No. That was just for this...what do you call it when the City Council passes on something?

M: Ordinance?

N: The desegregation ordinance.

M: That was when? The '50s or the early '60s?

N: No, it was in the '50s.

J: You said it was before the nation-wide desegregation laws?

N: Yes.

M: Before '54?

N: Yes. It must have been about '52 or '53.

M: But segregation continued after that, didn't it? I remember selling newspapers when I was a kid in downtown El Paso, and after 1955 I still remember seeing signs at the Grey Hound bus depot, "Colored people eat here."

N: Yes. And "drink here." You even had a fountain.

M: Yes, a special drinking fountain.

N: Since you said that, it might have been the early '60s because I believe that desegregation in '54 just concerned schools and inter-state travel. You know, it used to be they had a "Jim Crow" car--you rode in it by yourself on the train right up behind the engine. After that, if it was inter-state travel, you didn't have to get in that "Jim Crow" car. I remember coming from Knoxville, Tennessee. I got in this coach and it was so crowded--oh, it was just so crowded. So I said to the porter, "When we get to the next stop, would you move me up into the 'Jim Crow' car?" He looked at me and he said, "Lady, you don't have to move in there. This is inter-state travel." I said, "That's all right. I want to move; it's too crowded back here." So he moved me. But before that, coming down from the North one time I came out of St. Louis and when we got to some place like Tulsa maybe, I said to the porter, "Now when we get to the border

of Texas, will you move me into the 'Jim Crow' car?" And he said, "Oh lady, you should have been in there a long time ago." But I didn't know it. I thought you didn't have to move until you got to the border of Texas.

J: Did you have to do the same thing up there in the North? Would they segregate you in busses in Ohio?

N: Oh no.

J: So that changed in Atlanta?

N: Well, I'll tell you. See, if you were going South from Ohio, when you crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky then's when you had to get in the "Jim Crow" car. So you might as well get in it in Cincinnati, which was just on the other side of the river. So you'd just get in the "Jim Crow" car in Cincinnati and go on down. The first trip I made, I was very young; I was 19. I had never been down in the deep South, so people said to me, "Now, there's certain places that you go through and the conductor will come to you and tell you and you have to pull your shades down while the train is in that station." But I don't think it was true because no one ever said that. After that I traveled all over the South and I didn't find any place where you had to pull your shades down.

M: Did you perceive any prejudice on the part of Mexican Americans toward Blacks here?

N: Now, with our association with them, no. But I think probably with another class of Mexicans there might have been a difference. But I think with that class they were prejudiced against their own people, the class of people that my husband worked with. See, my husband was working with mostly the poor people. And I can't say that either because I remember a family that he had when I first



came to El Paso. They were very wealthy Mexicans from Mexico City, and when we went down to Mexico City we went to visit them. Isn't it queer, in a city with 3 million people that the first day you're in the city you should walk out on the street and run into [friends]? And that's what we did. We were walking down to Sanborn's for breakfast, and who should we walk into but Mr. Betancourt. Why, we just stopped and hugged each other there on the street, and he had us come out to their apartment. But he used to send his wife and children up here every September to school; and then if any of them were sick, she would always call Lawrence. And then, I remember, I was in bed--my little girl was just a day old--and Mrs. Betancourt came by to tell us good-bye, and she said she wasn't coming back any more. They were very beautiful--she and her daughters. They wore such beautiful clothes. She said, "No, I'm not coming back any more with my children," because her oldest girl had married an Anglo and she was just sick about it. So she said, "I'm not coming back any more," and she didn't! I don't think it was so much that he was an Anglo, but she felt that he was very much beneath them. He was either a carpenter or a house painter or something like that; and his mother just thought it was awful that her son was marrying a Mexican! Well, look how we are now. We just have a fit with these mixed marriages and we sit down and laugh and talk about it and say, "Why we're just as prejudiced as anybody else." Just recently a friend of ours, her daughter (she just finished UTEP about 3 years ago) [married an] Anglo, and her mother has never been reconciled to it. The girl has just died, and it's been terrible, awful the way she's been cut up about it. But you see, prejudices aren't always on one side.

M: Sure. Nobody has a monopoly on them.

N: No.

M: How did you perceive the attitudes in the behavior of Anglos toward Mexicans in this town? Did the Black community talk about that at all?

N: Well, yes. They weren't quite as bad off as we were, but you know, there were many places--not here in El Paso--but there were many places down going toward Houston where they would refuse to serve Mexicans. I remember one time one of the officials of Mexico City [had to have] the Highway patrol escort them through Texas, because they were stopped one time. They wanted to stop or stay or eat or something, and they refused them. And so, after that, the Highway Patrol would always escort them through Texas. There was quite a bit [of prejudice].

#### SIDE II

N: My daughter Edna was coming home through town. There used to be a very lovely tearoom there beside the White House Department store. So [a friend] said, "Come on, Edna, let's go in and get some ice cream." Of course, Edna knew right away, "Why, I can't go in there." But she didn't want to tell this girl, "I can't go in." So she went on in with her. You know, Edna said they served them and no one looked a second time; but she was just scared to death for fear they were going to come and say, "You'll have to leave."

J: Many times it's not the bodily injury you're afraid of; it's just humiliating in itself.

N: Yes, that's right. Yes, that's worse than any bodily hurt you might get. Often, the older ones of us [would] get together and say, "These young people nowadays, they just haven't any idea of what you went through." And they'll say, "Well, why did you do it?" But what

were you going to do? There wasn't anything else to do. We just had to wait and let things change. But isn't it wonderful that things did change? Just wonderful.

J: I want to ask one more general question. On the whole, you think that in El Paso things were a lot better off than in the East or in the North.

N: Oh yes. Probably not in the North. However, I think the South has progressed a lot faster than the North has. Now we never had any trouble in the North until after the first World War, and there was a big influx of people that came up--Black and white--from the South at the time. And then we began to have more trouble. Now, my sister and I were usually the only Blacks in the school where we went.

[When] I went to high school we lived just outside the city limits, and anybody that lived outside the limits had to go over to Eastside High School, which was a long way over. So when I went over there, I was the only Black student there. Everyone was very nice and kind to me. I was Concert Master in the school orchestra and then I wrote for the magazine. Oh, I wrote some very lurid serials. I remember one; all I knew about the border was what I had read. And I wrote one serial about the border. Now I can't remember what it was. The kids would meet me in the hall and say, "Drusilla, what's going to happen next month?" When I graduated, the President of our class... his family had the most popular fountain pen back in those days. And he presented me, before the student body, with this pen, as being the most outstanding writer during my high school years. Then I was elected as the class novelist for the banquet. I was very comfortable. Now, the only thing was, when I graduated I didn't get any scholarship; and I needed a scholarship so badly because my people

were poor and I didn't have any money to go to college with. They were trying to get me into Oberlin, because Oberlin had such a good music school. But the white children got all the scholarships. I wanted to go to Oberlin very badly, but I didn't get to go. Now, of course, there are scholarships going to waste.

M: It's very different.

N: I have a friend that came here to live from my hometown. Her father died when she was 10. So she had to work to get through school. She graduated from the University of Toledo. She's a little bit younger than I am, and she went to Ohio State and the University of Wisconsin and got her degree. She taught in the school there for 35 years, and then retired and she went down to Mexico and lived down in Mexico for nearly four years. Then I insisted on her coming back because, you know, when you get older anything is liable to happen to you. I knew I'd have to go down and get her because she has no family. So I insisted on her coming back to this country. So she came to El Paso, and she's been here for 6 years and loves it.

M: Mrs. Nixon, if this were 1935 and you had a choice of going elsewhere, would you settle in El Paso?

N: Yes, I believe I would. The only thing is, you see, I really can't say, because my marriage was such a good marriage and I was so happy, I would have been happy any place. But I love El Paso. There isn't any place in the world I would like to live. I love El Paso, and I always have ever since that first week or so that I was here getting used to the difference. But I do, I love El Paso.

N: What is it that you have loved over the years about this city?

N: Well, one thing, I love the Mexican atmosphere very much. I studied very hard to be really fluent in Spanish; and I think the Spanish language is beautiful. I had studied German and French before, and I tell everybody, "Learn Spanish. It's just beautiful." Oh, I loved everything about it. You know, when I first came here and I lived down in Second Ward, there were only about three or four Black families down there. I would wake up in the night and hear singing. It would be somebody's birthday or name day or something and they'd have the guitars and sing all these beautiful Mexican folksongs. And do you know what happened? I suppose you'll find it on a city ordinance now, that it was against the law. They passed a law, it was against the law to disturb people with their music at night.

J: I know it is. I almost got arrested for that one night. We wanted to sing for Mother's Day.

M: Las Mañanitas?

J: Las Mañanitas. We went around singing to all our mothers, and the police came up and said, "You get out of this neighborhood or we're going to have to take you in."

N: Yes. Oh, I was so mad. It was so beautiful to wake up [and hear that]--just beautiful. I just loved it. I think that my husband felt the same way because he came here in 1910 and he left here once. He went up to Denver for a week, and never left this town until I insisted--it was about 1944. I said, "You've just got to take a vacation." He didn't want to go, and I just said, "The children and I are going to leave you if you don't go. We're going to go on vacation." So he took two months off and we went East. Ever since that, every year [we went on vacation]. In '45 we went to Mexico City. We were going through Torreón and when we got off to walk up and

down the platform there while the train was there, someone told us that the War had ended. They had had a big celebration up here in El Paso. And then, we went back to New York several times. Then we took a Great Lake cruise. The children and my husband had never been on water before. I was raised on Lake Erie and we went every summer on the lake. But they had never been on water before, so I said, "Before we go on the ocean we'll go on the lake." So we took a Great Lake tour from Chicago to Buffalo, to Niagara Falls and back. Then the next year we went to New York and got a ship and went down. We made 13 stops through the West Indies and went as far as Venezuela.

J: You never felt like settling anywhere else?

N: No.

M: You always came back to El Paso.

N: Oh yes. You couldn't have moved him away from El Paso. He loved El Paso, too.

M: There's one question I want to ask you regarding the suit that was filed on behalf of your husband. What effect did that have on your family life? Did that create a strain?

N: Well, now you see, I wasn't married to him then. We didn't marry until '35.

M: But that wasn't settled until the '40s.

N: No, it was settled about early '35. He told me some of the effects of it. Some of the people who had been very good friends quit speaking to him. Even some of the Blacks said, "He's going to stir up trouble for us." I think that in some of his business dealings he was sort of rebuffed. But he was a very quiet man and sort of shy. If he did something, he just went ahead and did it without any flurry. If he

set his mind to it, he went ahead regardless of what people would say. I think, by that time, he had felt that he was paying taxes just like anybody else and it was terrible not to allow him to vote. I think he just decided, "This is it, whatever happens." And then he went through with it. He had a very wonderful lawyer.

M: That comes through in that book that Mr. Bryson brought.

N: Yes, he was a fine man. By that time, you know, people had begun to see what was completely wrong--that people ought to be judged as individuals. And there it was again--taxation without representation. They take your taxes and yet you couldn't select anybody. So it was just time for a change.

J: Can you tell us a little bit about Lord Beresford and Lady Flo?

N: Well, just what my husband told me, because he was their physician. He was her physician until she died. She lived down there on Fourth and St. Vrain. Their house is still down there. Now, my husband tells it a little bit different than it is in the book [about them]. Lord Beresford was a young [Englishman]. You see, in England, everything--all the property and the titles and everything--went to the oldest son. I don't know whether it's still that way or not. But the oldest son got it all. Well, then the younger children were supposed to make it someplace out in the world. So Lord Beresford--this son--came to New Orleans. He was coming to the New World. Now, this is the way my husband tells it. When he got to New Orleans, there was a yellow fever epidemic and right away he gets it. He was in his hotel room and no one would come near him because everyone was afraid of it, you know, but this one colored girl. And she came and she nursed him and fed him, and when he recovered he married her. Now, I think the way Mr. Porter tells it, they met down in Mexico.

J: There are quite a few different accounts of this.

N: Yes. But, now, this is what she told my husband. They had a ranch down here. I knew an old pioneer here that was here before my husband, and when we went up to Pendale he came and worked for us. He was the farmer around there. He said that he was here and he used to see them when they came to town. He said they drove in a beautiful buggy. I don't know what kind of buggy, but the buggy all shiny with lovely horses. They would drive into El Paso from this ranch down in Mexico and stay here a while. They had this house there on Fourth Street. Then he had a ranch up in Canada, and Mr. Porter went up there to visit the family--some of his family's still on that ranch up there--and they have a museum, Beresford Museum, up there. So when he came back from there, he asked me could he send my husband's picture up there; they wanted his picture in the museum because he had been their physician. So, she was left with something because she never worked, and they said she used to be very good to the people in the neighborhood, especially to the people that were needy.

J: I heard that her furniture and clothes were out of this world.

N: Yes, they were.

J: Old style velvet cut furniture and things like this--gorgeous things.

N: Yes. Well, the woman that lived across the street from them was a very good friend of ours. Her husband used to go hunting, especially deer hunting, with my husband. And she told me--she knew her very well--that she was a very nice person. Now, I think that they probably considered her in New Orleans as a lady of the night. But, she married him. Mr. Porter came out here and asked me did I



know her, and I told him what my husband had told me about her. You know, [my husband] had another patient that I would love to have talked to. She lived in one of those hotels that's along Alameda just before you get to Copia. They're second hand stores and everything downstairs and then there's stairways that go up. On the second and third floor are rooms. Well, she lived in there. She was an old lady, and he would go and see her, and I knew she didn't have any money. She was sick and he was just going to look after her, but he never got any pay for it. He used to tell this to Arredondo who was in the drugstore under his office, to send her her medicine and he'd be responsible for it. Well, finally she got real sick and he sent her to the hospital. He said, "She just can't live," and he sent her out to the county hospital. So he told me about her and he said, "You know, she's French and she was from Paris and she came over." She had studied at the Paris Conservatory. She must have come over here maybe 1900 or something. She was an old lady then. She was a fine pianist, and about the only thing she could do was maybe play in a joint. And this man, here in El Paso owned a big joint here, some kind of big inn. Anyhow, somehow or other he met her in New Orleans and she came here with him. She told my husband that her family in France was a bit well-to-do and big, but she never wanted them to know what became of her, that she had never been in touch with them all these years.

M: Isn't that interesting? There must have been an interesting story behind that.

N: Oh, it must have been very interesting because she had been a very fine pianist at one time, and there she was just penniless. But she never wanted her people to know anything about it.

M: Well, Mrs. Nixon, we want to thank you very much. You've been very kind and we've learned a lot. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW