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Interview no. 195

Gaspar Cordero

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Gaspar Cordero
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 3, 1975
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TRANSCRIBER: Teresa Jimarez
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Native El Pasoan and businessman.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; Mexican Americans in El Paso; experiences with discrimination; the Casino Mexicano in El Paso; work with the Mexican Boundary Commission and ASARCO in México; South El Paso; Ciudad Juárez in the 1920's and 1930's; views on the Bicentennial; future of Mexican Americans.

1 1/4 hours.
39 pages.

CORDERO

This interview is being held in El Paso, Texas on July 3, 1975. The subject of the interview is Mr. Gaspar Cordero, of El Paso. Interviewer is Richard Estrada.

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

C: I was born in El Paso.

E: In what year?

C: In 1908.

E: Could you tell me something about your parents?

C: My father came from Jiménez, Chihuahua. My mother was from a New Mexico family, when New Mexico was a Mexican territory, before the Mexican-American War.

E: What year was your mother born in?

C: Right now I couldn't tell you. I'd have to look up the records, but I'd say about 1885, thereabouts.

E: How about your father? Do you know more or less?

C: About the same general time.

E: Did you come from a large or a small family?

C: On my mother's side, there were numerous sisters. But on my father's side, it was a small family. That I know of, there were just four brothers and sisters.

E: How about your brothers and sisters? How many did you have?

C: I just have one brother.

E: Is he still alive?

C: Yes, he is.

E: Where does he reside?

C: He resides in El Paso.

E: Could you tell us something about your formative years here in El Paso-- your growing up, your elementary schooling, that type of thing?

C: I was born in what we used to call Second Ward. That's on Fifth and Saint Vrain, to be exact. The first school that I went to was a kindergarten which was located near Alamo School. Then I went to the elementary school of Alamo. Then we moved north, and I switched to Sunset Grammar School, and eventually I ended up in El Paso High School. It was the only high school in El Paso at that time.

E: About what year did you start kindergarten?

C: I'd say about 1913.

E: That would be right in the middle of the Mexican Revolution. What was the ethnic composition of the kindergarten class in your first school?

C: We were all Mexican Americans.

E: What about you teachers?

C: They were all Anglo Americans.

E: Were there any particular authority figures, principals or teachers that you recall especially well that had an influence on your life?

C: Yes, I recall some teachers in high school that I admired particularly. One of them was a mathematics teacher; her name was Rebecca Goldstein. Then there was a Mrs. Frank Sainer. Then there was an English teacher by the name of Jeanie McFurson Frank, who knew the English language just about as well as anybody. She was an author, too.

E: Did these people influence you in some way?

C: Not particularly, but I do remember them as [being] very capable teachers who knew how to teach.

E: Did you ever have any Mexican American teachers at all in high school?

C: I remember a native of Spain, Mrs. Alonzo. She taught Spanish. But that's the only one.

E: Is there any experience, or set of experiences, that stick out prominently in your mind while you were going to school? Was there anything unusual that happened in your school years?

C: No, not really.

E: Everything was pretty normal?

C: Yes. [There were] no outstanding events.

E: Did you enjoy a happy youth?

C: Yes, I guess about normal.

E: What was your father doing while you were going to school?

C: My father ~~was~~ working at the Elite Confectionary. That was an old-time ice cream factory that was quite famous here in town in those days. He was the foreman of manufacturing processing, with candy making and ice cream making.

E: Was your mother a housewife during these years?

C: Yes.

E: Mr. Cordero, did you ever experience any discrimination while you were going to school?

C: I would have to say that all of us experience [this] to some extent, yes. Some more than others. Fortunately, I don't think that I was a victim of too much discrimination. I don't recall any particular disagreeable incident. But I could sense it all around.

E: Could you be a little more specific as to how it manifested itself?

C: It wasn't something that you could say was anything harsh, but it was there. You could sense it in school with your teachers; you could see it in the places you worked in certain ways. We knew it was there. I'll give you an example. I was in college at UTEP; it was then known as Texas College of Mines. One day a group of us Mexican American students--

there were about five of us--were walking from one building to the next, and the professor was with us. We were talking away in Spanish; it was natural, talking the old native language. He told us to cut it out, to not talk Spanish on the campus; to talk English. That's sort of humiliating. To me [that's] a form of prejudice.

E: Did your fellow classmates feel this way?

C: Oh, yes. We all felt embarrassed, but there was nothing we could do about it.

E: Do you feel that most of the professors felt this way?

C: No. As a matter of fact, I think we had some very fine professors at that time. And I don't think this man was really conscious of the fact that he was being discriminatory in his remark, because he was a very fine professor. We had some good teachers. I remember most of them with affection.

E: What kind of jobs did you hold in youth, while you were going to high school?

C: I starting working when I was eight years old, after school and during vacations. I worked at the department stores downtown.

E: What would you do there?

C: I started sweeping floors and washing the windows for a department store on Overland Street. My uncle used to work there as a salesman. Later I started to work at the Popular. At that time I was about 14 years old.

I used to make \$5.00 a week. This was about in 1923, '24, '25.

E: Did you know Mr. Schwartz?

C: Oh, yes.

E: What do you recall about Adolph Schwartz?

C: Of course, he was the "Old Man;" he was the boss. He was rather a hard boss. I would say that he was a very hard man to work for. In those days, if you had to work extra time, there was no pay for it. You just did the work and that's it. I guess it was a good experience, though.

E: Was he a fair employer?

C: Yes. I would say so. Of course, wages were very low at that time. I don't think that it was fair to make an employee work three or four hours extra time and not pay him for it; that was not fair. Aside from that, they were pretty good people.

E: Did everybody work under those circumstances?

C: Yes, most everybody.

E: No matter what ethnic origin they were?

C: No matter.

E: By the way, what kind of people would he employ? Did he employ mostly Mexicans?

C: Yes. I would say that a good 60% of the employees of that store were

Mexican Americans.

E: What kind of jobs would they work at?

C: Cashiers and salesmen, mostly.

E: Your father was in his mature years during the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from about 1910 to 1920. Did you ever hear him talk about any of his experiences here on the border, relating to this Revolution?

C: The only thing I know is that one of the excursions that the rebels took into Juárez, and they captured Juárez, my father was an employee of the government, naturally on the opposing side. They captured him and they were going to execute him. But my aunt Francisca and my mother intervened with President Madero, who was in Juárez at that time; after the town had been secured, he came into town.

E: That must have been in the Spring of 1911.

C: It was one of those years. I think it was the Villa forces that took Juárez.

E: That's very interesting. Could you tell me what kind of job your father had for the federal government?

C: He worked at the Customs Building.

E: In Ciudad Juárez?

C: Yes, along with other friends that time came to reside in El Paso, fleeing from the Revolution.

E: Do you remember the particular nature of his job?

C: No, I don't.

E: Did you ever know the Arguëlles from Ciudad Juárez?

C: Doctor Arguëlles? Yes.

E: Did you ever know Camilo?

C: Yes, I knew Camilo.

E: When did you meet him?

C: We were frineds in about 1939, '30, '31--during those years. We were both members of the social club here in El Paso; Mexican society represented in this club. It was called the Casino Mexicano. At that time it was located on Oregon Street, where Rodgers and Belding is now located. That's where we had the club.

E: Were there many of these clubs in El Paso?

C: That was the principal social club of the Mexican community here in El Paso.

E: What was the principal objective of this club? Was it just social, or did it have civic duties?

C: It was just to keep the families that came from México together and in contact; it was a social club.

E: There must have been many families that fled the Revolution, then.

C: Very well-known families, the best families here in El Paso belonged to that club.

E: Where did the best-known families in El Paso reside at that time?

C: I would say most of them [resided in] Sunset Heights.

E: Do many of the descendants still live there?

C: Yes. By all means, yes. In fact, I could refer you to some of those people. Do you know Mr. Acevedo?

E: No, sir, I don't.

C: His [grand] daughter is the present Sun Queen of 1975.

E: Could you name some other names?

C: Yes. Mr. Oscar Casas, who resides on Hawthorne. Some of the old timers are dead.

E: Did you ever know J. G. Hernández of the Mexican central railways?

C: Oh, very well. Mr. Hernández's son, Felipe, is a good friend of mine.

E: Could you tell me more about Camilo Argüelles? You say you first met him in 1929?

C: About [that time.] Of course, he was older than I was, so there was not much contact between us.

E: He must have been at least thirty years older than you.

C: I don't know how much older, but it was some years; enough to make a difference so that he belonged to one group and I belonged to another. I was a junior at that time, and he was a senior.

E: Was he a friend of your father?

C: I don't believe so, no.

E: Of course he had been Customs Collector at Ciudad Juárez during the porfiriato.

C: Oh, I think you're talking about Camilo's father. I knew Camilo Argüelles, Jr. There were some more Argüelles I knew at that time. Dr. Argüelles, here in El Paso.

E: Was he a relative of these other people?

C: Yes. He was a brother to Camilo's father, I think.

E: Did Camilo Jr. live in El Paso?

C: Yes, he did.

E: Whereabouts in El Paso did he live?

C: Somewhere in Sunset Heights, but I don't recall where. He was a good friend of this man that used to give Spanish classes. Maybe you know him-- Chávez.

E: Yes, I've heard of him.

C: Tomás Chávez. Camilo and Tomás were in the same age group, maybe seven

or eight years older than I was.

E: Did you ever meet the elder Arguelles?

C: No.

E: You were going to high school in the early twenties, is that right?

C: Yes. I was in high school until 1928.

E: What did you do when you got out of high school?

C: I went to the School of Mines [UTEP].

E: Directly out of high school?

C: Yes. I enrolled in September of 1928.

E: What was your major?

C: Mining engineering.

E: Was that most of the people's major?

C: At that time, yes, because that's what it was--a mining school.

E: It didn't offer any other majors at all?

C: No, it didn't. I remember originally that we had only five buildings, which you can still distinguish on the campus, because they're different from the others. I believe that there were over 300 students when I was there. By the way, my good friend Joseph Friedkin, Ambassador Friedkin, was a classmate of mine. He and I graduated in 1932 in the same mining class.

E: Very interesting. How many Mexican Americans were attending the School of Mines at that time?

C: Out of the whole enrollment, about 50.

E: Would it be safe to say that these were the Mexican Americans of the higher social classes in El Paso, with the Mexican American community.

C: You might say that they were upper middle class. There were some foreign students, too, from México.

E: Mexicans would come up here to school?

C: Yes. In fact, in our graduating class of '32, out of 8 graduates--now that was the whole graduating class of 1932 with a mining degree--2 of them were from México. Out of the 8, five of us were Mexican Americans.

E: Did the School of Mines have any kind of reputation in those years for mining engineering?

C: I think it did enjoy good reputation because there were students here from several places. There was one from the Philippines, several [were from] México; so I would say that it had a fair reputation.

E: Do you remember what states in the interior these Mexican students were from?

C: No, not from what states. But one of them had been a military student in Mexico City. One was from Sonora. I don't know where the other one was from.

E: Did you ever know any of the more prominent Anglo Americans here in El Paso during these years. For instance, did you ever know Tom Lea?

C: I didn't know him well, but we went to high school together.

E: Was this Tom Lea, Jr.?

C: Yes, the artist. We were not in the same class, but we were in high school at about the same time.

E: Did you ever meet his father?

C: Mayor Tom Lea? No, I didn't.

E: When you got out of the School of Mines in 1932, what did you do, sir?

C: Of course, you wouldn't recall the Depression; you weren't born yet. That was the height of the big Depression. I had a sheepskin that said that I was a Bachelor of Science in Mining Engineering. My first job was with a pick and shovel with the WPA. You've heard about the WPA?

E: Yes, the Works Progress Administration.

C: Yes.

E: How about your fellow graduates? What kind of work did they do?

C: About the same. In fact, on either side of me at that time were doctors, lawyers, and engineers with years of experience, wielding a pick and shovel.

E: What kind of work would you do with the WPA? Where did you work?

C: On different roads, like Scenic Drive; and around the School of Mines, building the road and the old stadium.

E: What kind of wages did you get?

C: Thirty dollars a month.

E: Was it adequate?

C: At that time, it was very adequate.

E: Did you have a family yet?

C: No. I wasn't married yet.

E: How old were you?

C: Twenty-four.

E: How long did you work with the WPA?

C: About six months, maybe more. Then a good friend of mine, Alejandro López, who was a member of one of the more prominent families here, got me a job with the Mexican Boundary Commission. The Mexican Commissioner at that time, Mr. Armando Santa Cruz, was married to [López's] aunt; and through that influence, I got a job with the Mexican Boundary Commission. I jumped from laborer--getting thirty dollars a month--to an engineer--making a hundred and eighty-five dollars a month over night.

E: Would you characterize this as extraordinary?

C: Extraordinary, yes. I was making more than the bank president of El Paso

[National Bank], whoever it was at that time. This was the height of the Depression, mind you. Everybody was broke!

E: How did you feel about this move? What were your thoughts?

C: Oh, I thought it was a miracle! And to me it was very good, because I started to get experience in the line of work I studied for. I worked three years for the Mexican Boundary Commission. That was a very, very happy time for me, because the contacts [and] the friendship that I made there were something I remember with a great deal of affection.

E: Name some Mexicans that you met.

C: Mr. Armando Santa Cruz was then the commissioner. Ingeniero Amor, Ingeniero Fernández MacGregor, Vicente Rubio. By the way, Vicente Rubio still works for the Boundary Commission.

E: Where are the headquarters of the Boundary Commission?

C: They are at the portion of land that was traded when the Chamizal [was] agreed upon. As you cross the free bridge, over there by PRONAF, it's over on the road to the left, and follows down the river. The buildings are in that area. It used to be downtown.

E: So you worked there for two years, making a hundred and eighty dollars a month.

C: A hundred and eight-five, yes.

E: Were you living with your parents at this time?

C: Yes, I was still living with my mother.

E: What was your brother doing at this time?

C: My brother was working in México City at that time. He had a job with the Mexican Irrigation Commission. Then he came back and he got a job with the Boundary Commission, too, after I left.

E: At the same salary?

C: I don't know; more or less, I would said.

E: Is your brother older or younger than you?

C: He's four years younger.

E: After you finished working for the Boundary Commission, what did you do?

C: In 1935, there was a political change in México, and we knew that Mr. Santa Cruz was going to be replaced. I knew that I would possibly be out of a job; so I got a job with American Smelting and Refining Company in San Luis Potosí, México. I started to work for them in September of 1935. That's when I got married.

E: Where is your wife from?

C: From El Paso.

E: What is her family's background?

C: Her family's name is Talbot.

E: She's an Anglo?

C: Her father was an American, originally from Massachusetts. [His family] settled in Georgetown, Texas. Her father married a Mexican woman, so [my wife] is half Mexican and half Anglo.

E: Did you meet her here in El Paso?

C: Yes.

E: Did her family move down here?

C: Yes, her father moved from Georgetown, Texas, to El Paso.

E: What was the nature of his business?

C: I think he worked for the City, but I don't know what kind of a job he had.

E: So you moved to San Luis Potosí in 1935?

C: Yes.

E: Do you recall if the Guggenheims still owned ASARCO?

C: Yes, they did at that time.

E: Did you ever meet any of the Guggenheims?

C: No, I didn't.

E: Were any of them ever present on the property?

C: No. They never were.

E: Did they work out of New York City?

C: Yes.

E: Tell me something about the pay scales. Were the Anglo American employees and the Mexican employees paid the same if they did the same job?

C: That's another thing. I went to work for American Smelting for a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month as a junior engineer. I worked two years for them in San Luis Potosí, and then changed to another company. But when I quit them after two years, I was getting two hundred [dollars a month]. Their wage scales were not the same. The American engineers got a little bit more.

E: This leads me to what has always been an interesting point to me, Mr. Cordero. During the time you were growing up in El Paso, and during the time you were in México working for an American company did the Anglos perceive any difference between a Mexican American and a Mexican?

C: Yes. We--like myself, a graduate of an American school and having lived here, and being an American citizen-- were better received than a native Mexican engineer working for them in México.

E: And yet, do you think that you, as a Mexican American, were discriminated against while you were working down there?

C: There was a little difference between the Anglo American engineer and the Mexican American engineer, as far as preference is concerned.

E: What about pay scales?

C: Well, they got the best jobs, of course.

E: For instance, if there were an Anglo and a Mexican American working at the same job, would they get the same wages?

C: In many instances, they did not.

E: The Mexican American would get a lesser wage?

C: Yes.

E: Would there be any difference if, for instance, there were an Anglo American, a Mexican American, and a Mexican national working at more or less the same job? Would there be three different scales?

C: Well, there would be at least two.

E: Did you ever know of any case where there were three scales?

C: No, I really don't.

E: How would you characterize your relationship with ASARCO in San Luis Potosí?

C: Very good. We were very well received. We were given a house in the staff compound, you might call it, where the staff lived. [They] were the preferable houses. That's where the superintendent, mine foreman, and the engineers lived. I can't complain about that. Everywhere we went, they received us quite well.

- E: You said that a couple of years before you had been working in Ciudad Juárez, making a hundred and eighty-five dollars a month. Down in San Luis Potosí, you were making a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month with ASARCO at the beginning. How did you find living in San Luis Potosí in regard to the cost of living?
- C: Oh, much cheaper! Everything was much cheaper than there. Now, you must realize that we also had a rent-free house, and people to do your yard work and things like that. [We had] free fuel, free facilities. So that counted. But the cost of living in San Luis Potosí at that time was very, very low. Food was very, very cheap.
- E: Would you say that with the fringe benefits, that the wage that you received up here on the border and the one you had down there were almost on a parity?
- C: I would say that they were at least equal, if not a little better.
- E: What was the company you moved to after ASARCO?
- C: The Potosí Mining Company.
- E: Who ran that company?
- C: It was an American Company headquartered in Seattle, Washington, called the _____ Mining Company.
- E: Why did you make the move?
- C: I didn't think I was getting ahead fast enough. A very good friend of

mine who had graduated with me--one of my classmates--was then working for Potosí Company in Chihuahua. That was my part of it. So we decided to move north. Also it was close to the border, and you get used to wherever you've lived for so many years.

E: You mean the Potosí Mining Company was based in Chihuahua?

C: The mine was about 15 miles outside of Chihuahua [City]. It was called Santa Eulalia. [It was] a very famous old mining camp. It was really discovered by the Spaniards.

E: What was the main ore?

C: Lead and Zinc.

E: What was your particular job?

C: I was an engineer.

E: You must have noticed the conditions of the Mexican miners that worked there. Do you recall how much they were being paid back in those days?

C: I can't recall. By today's standards, it's a very low wage. It was hard work for the miner--though the one that's digging out the ore and doing the labor. That's very hard work.

E: Would they commute from Ciudad Chihuahua, or was there a camp where they lived?

C: No, there was a little village nearby--Santa Eulalia; and the mine was just

outside of Santa Eulalia about a mile.

E: What years were you working there?

C: I worked there from 1937 to 1946, when the war ended.

E: You worked there quite a while.

C: About nine years.

E: Let's go back to about 1928, '29, '30, thereabouts. Do you recall ever hearing anything about the Cristero Rebellion in México?

C: Yes. I had no direct experience with them; we just used to read about them. However, my brother got somewhat involved down there in the state of Jalisco. He was working for the Irrigation Commission, and he had to go do some field work--I think he was doing some surveying. Jalisco was the hotbed of the Cristeros. They were anti-government, definitely. He [my brother] went through some very ticklish times down there with them. In fact, they had to call out the Army sometimes to protect these surveying crews, because they were always in danger of getting shot.

E: Did your brother ever talk to you about the conflicts that arose between the people and the government over there?

C: Yes. He used to tell me about what he went through down there. He would be more acquainted with that than I would, cause he had some experiences down there with the Cristeros.

C: Your brother still lives in El Paso?

C: Yes. He lives at 3000 Porter. He also worked for the Boundary Commission when I left.

E: So, you were at Santa Eulalia till about 1946. What did you do then, sir?

C: I quit mining all together, came back to El Paso, and started in the home building business.

E: Why did you quit mining?

C: I didn't believe that we were being paid enough money for our services at that time. Now, things did change considerably when the Mexican government sort of nationalized the mining industry and required that all management personnel in the companies would henceforth be Mexican; then the situation changed considerably. So some of these fellows that I knew that were contemporary with me are now directors of big mining operations in Mexico. They're making anywhere from \$50,000 to \$80,000 a year.

E: Do you regret having gotten out?

C: Well, hindsight, of course, is better than foresight. Nobody ever foresaw that this situation would arise. If it hadn't arisen, they would still be working down there for maybe \$1,500 a month or something like that.

E: You mentioned nationalization or expropriation. You were in Santa Eulalia in 1938, is that right?

C: When the petroleum expropriation came about? No. The petroleum expropriation came about when I was still working in Juárez in the Boundary Commission.

E: That's right. What were the sentiments [that] were being expressed here on the border when that took place?

C: Of course, American sentiments were definitely anti-Cárdenas, particularly the oil companies. And you can see why. They resented [that.]

E: Did you ever hear oil men here in El Paso talk about that?

C: No, because I was not acquainted with any oil men; but what you read about in the papers was definitely anti-Mexican government.

E: What were the sentiments of the Juarenses when this came about?

C: Of course, the sentiments in México were all for Cárdenas.

E: Was this particularly true in Juárez?

C: I believe so, yes.

E: What did your immediate superiors at the Boundary Commission have to say about it?

C: They thought it was a good move. In fact as a general rule all the people were for it. I remember that spontaneously they would turn in collections of money and gold rings and jewelry to the government to help pay for the reparations, to help pay the properties.

E: Would this go on in Juárez?

C: I saw that in Juárez.

E: They would actually give some of their personal jewelry?

C: Yes.

E: This is very interesting. Obviously this stirred up a lot of nationalism and patriotism.

C: That's correct.

E: So you say that they were very happy about it?

C: Yes.

E: Cárdenas must have been very popular.

C: I think [the] best thing Cárdenas ever did for México was to say, "This is our resource. We can't have it squandered any more and taken somewhere else."

E: Mr. Cordero, while you were working in the mining communities in México, did you ever see any evidence of socialist activity or labor organizing?

C: Yes. Of course, labor organizing had been going on even before that, and there was quite a ferment in the labor movement in México, just the same as it was in the United States. Some prominent figures at that time-- Lombargo Tolerano and people like that who were involved in the labor movement--were criticized of being Communist oriented. Actually, I don't think they were; they were just labor oriented.

E: Did any of these people ever visit the mining areas in México?

C: The labor leaders constantly visited the different sections of the country to talk to labor and get them organized.

E: Did you ever see any propaganda or hear of any propaganda in México emanating from the Socialist Movement in the United States?

C: No, I didn't.

E: So you came back to El Paso in 1946 to work in the home building industry. How did you get started?

C: Actually, a friend of mine that had gone to school with me--Emilio Peinado--[and I] were both out of a job for the same reason.

E: Which was?

C: We had quit the mining business. So we met here, being out of job. We started to think about what we were going to do. We thought about leasing the old Dudley Quarry from Mrs. Dudley; we thought about making some concrete blocks, for building purposes; and we finally decided on the idea of building houses. We didn't have much capital--we didn't have any.

E: Was it a partnership that you had?

C: Yes.

E: So you decided to go into the homebuilding business with Mr. Peinado?

C: Yes, and his brothers. They operated a filling station at that time, called the A and A Filling Station. So we put up \$3,000 a piece--\$12,000 capital--and organized the Home Construction Company.

E: A very basic sounding name!

C: Yes, very basic! [Laughter] Nothing original about the name! So we started building two houses on Fort Boulevard. Before they were finished, I decided I'd better go in business for myself, so I broke up the partnership with them. I went on my own; they continued with the company. Of course, they made very good at it.

E: Were there many other Mexican American businessmen in this kind of enterprise at that time?

C: In home building? No. In fact, after I left, they bought some acreage to develop it--a housing development called Altamira. You still see the little old houses up there on Trowbridge and Montana--old, old plastered houses, Spanish style. I believe, that was the first housing project at that time--modern housing in El Paso.

E: Would you characterize the firm that you and Mr. Peinado were involved in as the first Mexican American housing construction company in El Paso?

C: Well, if not the first, it was sure one of the first. [This was] right after the War--1946--and housing was in great demand. Nobody had ever gone into housing on a really large scale like a big sub-division--like buying a hundred acres and sub-dividing it into lots. I believe that Altamira sub-division was the first one in El Paso.

E: Did you take part in this?

C: No. I was already out of the company.

E: When you left this partnership, what did you go to do?

C: For a time I went back into mining for myself. A friend of mine got a hold of a little manganese prospect in Chihuahua, and at that time the American Government was buying manganese. So we thought there might be some money in that, but there wasn't. So I got back into the home building business again.

E: When you were in Chihuahua in about 1950, did you ever meet any of the state authorities down there--perhaps the Governor or anything like that?

C: No. The only governor that I knew was Borunda; but he was Governor after 1950. I had known him in Juárez when he was Mayor of Juárez.

E: So you came back to El Paso in 1950? Let's go off this subject for a little bit. What were the Mexican American and Anglo American relations like in the years 1945-1950? How would you characterize it?

C: Here in El Paso, they were good.

E: To what do you attribute this?

C: Perhaps to the very large Mexican American population. I don't know whether that would have anything to do with or not, but we did have good relationships. [That's in] my case, now. Perhaps I've been particularly fortunate in all this, but I never experienced a great amount of discrimination. I could see it, yes; I could sense it when I was young and I saw it first hand. But I wasn't really too much affected by it.

E: Would you say this was true of most of your friends?

C: Yes, most of my friends.

E: Did you ever travel to South El Paso in those days? Did you ever become familiar with it?

C: I was born in South El Paso. That was the Second Ward.

E: What streets were these?

C: South of San Antonio was the Second Ward.

E: Tell us something about growing up in South El Paso. Were there gangs?

C: Not like you would characterize them today, no. [It was] just like kids getting together, and one guy going up against another, but really nothing vicious. Maybe rock throwing and things like that--nobody ever got hit.

E: Do you recall any illegal activities?

C: No. I don't recall, when I was a young boy or young man, any big act of vandalism, too much crime, or drug addiction.

E: You don't think drugs were on the street? It wasn't prevalent?

C: Oh, no! Every kid knew that drugs were something to be avoided. It was a taboo thing, absolutely. Nobody dared to even smoke marijuana cigarettes much less use the hard drugs!

E: Was this true throughout the time you lived in El Paso up until about 1950?

C: Yes, up until the great World War. During the last twenty years is when it really came up. We didn't have that at all.

E: Do you think most of the families that lived in South El Paso at that time were fairly stable families?

C: Yes, they were. [They were] family oriented, particularly the Mexican Americans. They've always been that way. A great amount of stability. Families stuck together and helped each other. Kids had great respect for their parents and their elders.

E: Tell me about Ciudad Juárez during the early 30's or late 20's. What do you recall most about conditions in Ciudad Juárez?

C: Juárez at that time was a very lively place. It was a much better city than it is today. In Juárez, too, there was definitely an upper middle class at that time. I remember the very famous places in Juárez--like the Central Café, the Old Tivoli. All the famous cabarets and cafés at that time were on the 16th of September, like the Big Kid, The Mint, Central Café, The Arizona, and all those places. There was a sort of an atmosphere about Juárez then; it had a lot of flavor like being a sort of cosmopolitan place.

E: Were there a lot of visitors in the city at that time?

C: Oh, yes! Lots of tourists.

E: Was there more vice than there is now? Things like prostitution?

C: I don't think there was as much as there is today.

E: So most of the entertainment was along the lines of the cabarets and eating places, that kind of thing?

C: Right. Gambling casinos; the races at the old racetrack; Polo Games at the Waterfall Gardens I remember those very well. They were quite an

event. In fact, two friends of mine at that time were Doctor Monthoff and Doctor Goodwin [and] they were members of the American polo team that used to go over there and play against the Mexican teams every Sunday. It was quite an event. [It was] gay, and Juárez was really a nice place then.

E: How would you characterize relations between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso at that time?

C: Very good.

E: How would you compare them with relations today?

C: They're still very good, I believe. Sometimes there's a little friction but all in all I think that we have good relationships.

E: You were growing up here in El Paso during the Escobar Revolt. Do you remember anything about that?

C: The Escobar Revolution was in 1929. I remember something about it, what I used to read in the papers, but I can't recall too much.

E: Do you ever recall it manifesting itself in Ciudad Juárez? Do you ever recall any events that took place relating to the revolution in Ciudad Juárez?

C: Yes. One particular event comes to mind. They had a battle in Juárez.

E: Do you actually remember that?

C: Yes, because a friend of mine [and I]-- Col. Bill Bartlett, also a school

mate of mine-- were still in mining school and we sneaked across the river during the battle. We could see the shooting out there in the streets between the rebel forces and the government forces. We actually saw soldiers being shot and some rebels being shot.

E: Where did you sneak across?

C: Well, we just walked across the river at Stanton Street.

E: You just went across the bridge?

C: Yes. We walked all around the 16th of September. We were dodging around from door-to-door, watching all this; and there was a quite a lot!

E: You could have gotten killed!

C: Yes!

E: Did you see anyone killed?

C: We saw some two or three rebels laying out there in the street. And you could hear the shooting going on.

E: How did the people of the city feel about this rebellion?

C: I don't recall what the attitude was in Juárez at that time. Of course you know it was squashed pretty quickly.

E: Did any of the shots stray across the river?

C: I think they did. Maybe I've got my revolutions mixed up, but I recall that at one time Ft. Bliss called out a detachment and set up a canon up

here on high ground--I think it was on Mt. Franklin or Rim Road--because canon shots were reaching into El Paso. Now I don't know if that was the Escobar revolution or if that was before.

E: It is for certain that in 1919 Pancho Villa attacked Ciudad Juárez, and there were American soldiers that actually crossed the bridge.

C: Perhaps that's the one I'm [thinking about].

E: That's very interesting. What else do you remember about that battle? Were any of the civilians taking part in it?

C: No.

E: Just rebels and soldiers?

C: Yes.

E: Let's go back to El Paso in 1950, when you came back and started another go at business. What did you do then?

C: I started to build some homes.

E: Was this a one-man operation?

C: Yes.

E: Who helped you build these homes?

C: I hired sub-contractors to do everything. I'd buy lots and then get a plan, draw it up, and build for sale.

E: Have you been doing this ever since?

C: Yes. Of course, I'm semi-retired now.

E: Did you ever know any prominent El Pasoans in the 50's? For instance, did you know Fred Hervey back then?

C: Yes. I knew him in high school, and I also knew him when he started his first Oasis on Montana where Gillespie's is now.

E: What did you think of him?

C: I think he made a fine mayor. Fred Hervey is a very capable businessman, as you well know. I think that both his terms as a mayor were very good.

E: Who were the more prominent Mexican Americans in El Paso in the early 1950's?

C: I can recall Ernie Ponce. I think he was an Alderman.

E: What was his business?

C: He had a spaghetti factory. Of course, I remember Raymond Téllez.

E: How long did you know Téllez?

C: I knew him since he was County Clerk. Of course, I've know him ever since.

E: Are you friends with him?

C: Not close friends, but I would consider that he was a friend.

E: What was his occupation back in the early fifties?

C: He'd just come back from the Air Force, and I believe he served in México City

as a Liaison officer. When he came back to El Paso after being discharged, he ran for County Clerk and won.

E: Can you mention some other prominent Spanish surnames in El Paso at that time?

C: Not of hand.

E: Would you think that they were the most prominent at that time?

C: Well, they were some of the most prominent, yes. I remember Mr. Simón Silva.

E: What was his occupation?

C: He was a businessman. He had a very big hardware store on South El Paso Street. Then he had a wholesale house--clothing, notions, wearing apparel--and several articles.

E: Was there any particular year in which your home business reached an optimum of profit?

C: I would say that my best years were between '65 and '73.

E: Do you think this is generally true of the home construction industry?

C: I believe that [it was] as a general rule. Builders as a general rule were making more money.

E: Mr. Cordero, I'd like to move into the final phase of the interview now. You have been reading, no doubt, about the Bicentennial that's coming up.

C: Yes.

E: What are your feelings with regard to your identity with the Bicentennial? What does the Bicentennial mean to you as a Mexican American living in the United States in 1975?

C: As you know, the Bicentennial refers to the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the American republic. As such, it really isn't too close to the Mexican American inhabitants, naturally. However, as a celebration of the founding of a country, I think it's terrific! By all means, we should celebrate it, because we live here and this is our country-- we're citizens.

E: You have very positive feelings about it?

C: Yes. I just hope they don't commercialize it, because it's something that should be very serious. It has nothing to do with commercialization of any sort. It should be something that comes from the heart.

E: Do you think the Mexican American community should take active part in the celebration?

C: I believe they should, yes.

E: When you hear the names Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Hamilton, how do you identify with these people? What do you think about those individuals?

C: I identify with all great men, no matter where they came from. In the American Revolution against England, I identify myself very closely with such people as Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, and Benjamin Franklin. These

were the people that aroused the people to rebel against England. In other words, they were the radicals of their time, but they are great men. They were educated men, too.

E: So you admire them?

C: I do.

E: When you hear the term "forefathers" applied to them, do you consider them your forefathers?

C: Not mine. I cannot see them as my forefathers because I am not an Anglo American. Maybe an Anglo American doesn't understand what I'm saying, but there's two different ethnics here involved. But I do admire them as the founders of a country and shaking off the control of a tyrannical, autocratic king. That's why I admire them.

E: Have you ever studied any Mexican History?

C: Very little, unfortunately. This is what happens to most of us who grow up on the border. We never get too much of a chance to study Mexican History.

E: Have you ever developed any conceptions about the figures of the Mexican Revolution? Say Villa, Madero--what are your thoughts on people like that?

C: Yes. For example, I think that one of the great patriots of México was Benito Juárez and Morelos; and in later times Francisco I. Madero, who was a very well educated man of high ideals. That's why he didn't live long. The rest of the pack killed him. The Jackal Huerta assassinated him.

He was a great man, in my estimation.

E: Would you say you identify as much with the Anglo American patriots of the American Revolution as you do with Benito Juárez?

C: Yes, absolutely.

E: Would you say you identify with them to an equal extent?

C: Yes.

E: What kind of a relationship do you maintain with México? Do you maintain any political affiliation with México?

C: No.

E: How would you characterize your cultural affiliation.

C: Definitely, I feel a close affinity with México.

E: What does your wife think about any cultural conceptions she might have with México? Does she think like you do?

C: She's oriented in that respect.

E: Is your wife bilingual?

C: Yes. She's definitely Mexican American oriented. You see, her father died when she was very young, so her mother brought her up and had a great influence on her. Most of her friends in childhood were Mexican Americans.

- E: That's very interesting. What do you think about the role of the Mexican American in El Paso in the future--within the next ten years? Do you think there is going to be any substantial increase in that role or do you think things will remain the same?
- C: I look for more improvement and more benefits to the Mexican American population, and a greater role played by the Mexican Americans in the affairs of the city and the country as a whole. Little by little, it has to come. There's a great amount of potential talent there. You see it in the schools. Many of the Valedictorians and Salutatorians are Mexican Americans. The talent is there.
- E: So your feelings are positive about the future?
- C: Absolutely.
- E: Mr. Cordero, you've been very gracious and very informative, and I thank you for the interview.