

10-22-1975

Interview no. 208

Eligio "Kika" de la Garza

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



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

Recommended Citation

Interview with Eligio "Kika" de la Garza by Oscar J. Martinez, 1975, "Interview no. 208," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Eligio ("Kika") de la Garza (1927-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 22, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 208
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 208
TRANSCRIBER: Rhonda Hartman
DATE TRANSCRIBED: March 8, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

U. S. Congressman from Southeast Texas.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; life in Mission, Texas; Mexican American achievement; views on the Raza Unida Party; ideology; opportunities for Mexican Americans in the United States; views on the Chicano Movement and the Plan of Aztlán.

1 1/4 hours
30 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

- M: This is an Oral History interview with Congressman Eligio "Kika" de la Garza, Representative of the 15th Congressional District of Texas, October 22, 1975, Washington, D.C. Conducting the interview is Oscar Martínez from the University of Texas at El Paso. First of all, Congressman, can you tell me where and when you were born, sir?
- G: I was born in Mercedes, Texas, Hidalgo County, Texas on September the 22nd, 1927.
- M: Could you tell me who your parents and grandparents were and what their background was?
- G: My parents ([I'm] fortunate) are still living. My father is Darío de la Garza. He was born at a ranch in what is now Jim Hall County, named San Antonio Viejo near Randado. At that time it was Star County, before the turn of the century. I might add that his father, whose name I bear--Eligio de la Garza--also was born there; and the father before came from Marín, Nuevo León, which is right beyond Monterrey along the hills towards the border. The family had received a land grant from the king of Spain around 1725 or '30 for the area where my father was born. My mother is also still living, and her name is Elisa Villarreal. She was born in Mercedes, where I was born. Her [father was] Leonardo Villarreal, and my grandmother on my mother's side was named Anastacia Cantúan. That's where I get my Irish from. Her mother was of Irish descent. They had come

down to South Texas during the Civil War. That's my immediate family background.

D: Do you come from a big family--that is your nuclear family?

G: Unfortunately my immediate family, no; I only have one brother--only my brother and I. But the family reunions number in the hundreds.

M: So your extended family is large.

G: It's a very extended family, but unfortunately my immediate family is only my brother and I.

M: Any reason for that?

G: My parents never told me any reason. It just happened that way.

M: That's unusual. Mexican families usually are larger than that. What influence did your parents have on your early life that you have perceived?

G: Well, they have, of course, a very close influence. I have a sort of an unusual type life development because I didn't live with my parents since shortly after I was born. I lived with my paternal grandparents, although their houses were back-to-back. My grandfather had the old ancestral home in Mission, the old Spanish style. As each one of my uncles (or his sons) would marry they'd build a house surrounding the big house. So, my father's house was back-to-back. But I grew up in the best of two worlds with my grandparents and uncles who were unmarried [and] somewhat older than myself; so I grew up in this adult atmosphere. But yet, by stepping out the back door I could go into the back door of my mother and father's house. So, I really had the best of two worlds, and I did not grow up in the home of my mother and father, basically.

M: Did your grandparents have a substantial influence on you?

G: Well, I basically had two sets of parents. That's [how] it worked out. And both had, of course, great influence as all parents--in setting the example, which is one, but counseling and consoling when you have problems. Both families had great influence. I'm satisfied.

M: When you were a youth, Congressman, what did you want to become when you grew up?

G: I really don't know. I did everything. I shined shoes, sold newspapers, had my own shoeshine stand for a while--I was an independent businessman--I caddied at the golf course, I worked at a grocery store, a department store. Mind you, this is before I was in high school. In the beginning, as I look back, my main ambition was to join the Navy. I don't know why, but I wanted to be a sailor, which I did as soon as I became 17. But somewhere in the process there was an old gentleman in Mission named D. F. Strickland, an attorney--they call him Judge Strickland. I used to come and shine his shoes there in his office. This is when you got a nickle for a shoeshine and he always gave a quarter, so I was in the money there. He was a sort of a big man--smoked a cigar; and he appeared to be a rough, rough individual, but he wasn't. He was very kind. I used to shine his shoes and he would sit at a desk like I'm sitting and turn off to the side, and I'd sit on the floor and put my shoeshine box there and shine his shoes. And somewhere down the line I noticed that he never looked down at me. He never looked down to see if I was doing a good job with his shoes or anything. He always looked above me or across the room, but always spoke to me as an equal. Then I sensed this: "How are things? How's everything?" And we spoke about grown-up things there in the community and he carried on a

conversation, and somehow I always felt at ease--"This man isn't looking down at me and I'm shining his shoes. I don't know what he is, but whatever he is, I think that's what I'd like to be." And that was the beginning. When I found out he was a lawyer, then I would think that I wanted to go into the law profession.

M: That's really interesting. When I was a kid, I shined shoes myself and sold newspapers and so forth.

G: Well, that's what it came from--shining shoes for a lawyer and his demeanor towards me and his treating me, I felt, as an equal, I decided I would want to be whatever he was.

M: Do you think those experiences--shining shoes and selling newspapers, working at an early age--had a significant influence in the way your life would proceed later on?

G: Oh, it has a tremendous bearing, I think, on how a youngster will develop. It gave me a sense of independence. It gives you a sense of self-confidence. It gives you confidence to attack other problems because you're just a kid--7, 8, 9 years old--but you're dealing with the grown-ups on their level; you're a businessman. Certainly you need a lot of confidence in politics. And I think all of this work that I did as a youngster has given me the confidence--not arrogance, not foolish confidence--but the confidence to know your own competence, to know how far you can go.

M: I'm sure other kids were doing the same thing at that time, but many of them did not go on to achieve what you have achieved. How would you account for your having become a Congressman and some of them never having gone on to accomplish that, substantially?

G: Well, of the group that I grew up with, everyone in his own way has accomplished. We have a doctor, we have a lawyer. I happen to be

in Congress, but we have those who are independent businessmen. And then we have those who work for someone else, what we would call a middle or lower income type. But none of the group that I grew up with has ever gone to jail. None of the group that I grew up with has ever had major law enforcement type troubles. Yes, I guess luck and the will of God accounts for a lot of it. One of my former colleagues that I grew up with is there in Mission, Texas, now working for the government. He now has children in school. They now have children who have graduated from college. So I think we were a very fortunate group in a very fortunate time in a good place to live. I don't know the worth of all of the group, but I think all of us have achieved the potential that this country allows you to achieve as an individual.

M: You say that was a good place in which to grow up. Why do you say that?

G: Simply because it was--that a kid could shine shoes and get to be a Congressman[or] doctor (we have very prominent doctors from our group). In the teaching profession, we have very prominent teachers. It was the family, largely; the atmosphere. I guess every small town with closely-knit families and with respect for law and order gives you that sort of a background.

M: You would say that there was opportunity in that town--avenues toward achieving something later on?

G: Well, there wasn't all that much opportunity because [it] was a very small town, but there was no obstruction to your looking for the opportunity.

M: Did you feel a need to achieve at that early age, that you can recall?

G: Yes, I guess you did, thinking back, because I participated in every sport--football, basketball, and track. I did fairly good even though

I was quite small; I didn't weigh too much. That was your achievement at that time. Your claim to fame, I guess you might say, was whether you made the football team or not.

M: What would you identify as the origin of that feeling to want to succeed in what you were doing?

G: Well, I guess it just developed. It's an inward feeling that you can't explain, but somewhere down the line... Now that you mention it, perhaps my being smaller than the rest of the group made me try harder--try and keep up and compete with them. I guess maybe that might be a part of it.

M: Do you recall noticing poverty and the suffering of the lower classes at an early age? Do you recall at that time noticing the differences in wealth?

G: No, not really, because we were the poor; we were the lower class. There really wasn't any great wealth in our area. There were families that were wealthy, but the kids in school didn't show the great wealth. Everyone was alike. I recall during the Depression, even though all of us were poor, very few families really were on what you call welfare when they gave them apples and prunes and some of the stuff they gave to the schools and to the people. But noticing "This is a rich neighborhood, and this is a middle neighborhood, and this is a poor neighborhood"--the city was so small and it was so intermingled that I guess you didn't notice that there were a few very big nice houses. I doubt that when I was growing up there were 10 two-story houses in our area of Mission. It was a very small town [where] people didn't go around showing that they had or didn't have money. It wasn't as noticeable, I think, as in a large city. The city was basically

divided by the highway running east and west; the Anglos lived on the north side of town and the Mexican American lived on the southside of town. But we only had one high school and one junior high school, so at a very early age you didn't have that daily, continuous separation.

M: What was the breakdown of the population there ethnically?

G: Well, when I was growing up, I would say it was 50-50.

M: 50-50. That's ideal.

G: It isn't now. It's much larger Mexican American now. Probably 75%, maybe more. But at that time it was basically 50-50.

M: Would you tell me about incidents that stand out in your mind during your school experiences, elementary through high school?

G: Well, there are so many. Do you want good or bad?

M: Both.

G: One major incident was that one of our classmates was drowned at a picnic on an Easter Sunday when we were Juniors in high school. I almost drowned myself--another classmate dragged me out and saved my life. By the way, he just passed away a few weeks ago from cancer at a very early age. I was older than he was. He was probably about 45 or 46. But there are so many things that you look to now as you're growing up--major points, oh, who knows. When I first joined the Boy Scouts, I wanted to very badly; and I think that was a major point. [Another is] when you make your first Communion and [the family] makes a big feast. I went to a parochial school for grammar school--Our Lady of Guadalupe School there in South Mission. We then had graduation exercises with a mass at the church and everything like that.

M: Was this a mixed school also?

G: No, it wasn't. This parochial school was for the parish, and the parish was 99% Mexican American. We had two parishes then--one on the north side and one on the south side.

M: Did you have Mexican American teachers in that school?

G: No, they were all mostly Irish nuns. My freshman year I remember I was elected Vice-President of the [Freshman] class. I was beat out by a very good looking, nice girl named Jean Beth Foster that I haven't seen in 30 years; but beauty beat me for president of the Freshman class.

M: Do you recall any instances of ethnic discrimination in your own case or in somebody else's case during your school years?

G: Not directly, no. This is one of the things about the city where we grew up in. I understand that before my time there had been overt acts of discrimination in the schools. They had had a park, Lions Park for example, that said "White only" or something like that. But in my school years, I don't remember any direct or overt act of discrimination against me. There may have been some subtle discrimination against me. There may have been some subtle discrimination in the grown-ups as to availability of jobs or something like that, mostly, I guess, because of your background educationwise. Because my generation probably was the first generation in our area that provided students through college. Before then, very rarely would anyone from Mission period --whether Anglo or Mexican American-- go to college. Only those that were the wealthier type [Interruption].

M: When did you become a politically aware person, Congressman?

G: I guess forever. My family was always involved politically--my

father was, my grandfather, my uncles. My father was Precinct Chairman of his Precinct there for 20 or 25 years--all the time that I was growing up. I had an uncle who was a member of the City Council there in Mission; there were several. I was involved in handing out handbills. I was politicking in my own way, I guess, since I was very young.

M: When did you become interested in serious politics?

G: Well, when I ran for the State Legislature in '52. I had been in the Navy a short while towards the end of the War, and then I went and finished college and got an ROTC commission in the artillery; and I was recalled to duty during the Korean War. It was while I was in the Army that they had legislative redistricting and reapportionment in Texas, and our county received two additional seats in the Legislature. Amongst a group of the veterans and younger people, the consensus was that I was the most experienced politically, and they wanted a member of our generation to run for one of those seats. Since I was the most recently out of Law School and I was a dashing, young, good-looking Second Lieutenant, I guess I was kind of drafted for it. That was my first personal involvement in running for public office, although I had campaigned before for other candidates.

M: Did you make it into the State Legislature the first time you ran?

G: Yes, I did.

M: What kind of district did you represent? What was the ethnic composition?

G: Well, at that time, again, it was slightly over 50-50. Then maybe it would have been 60-40. It's much higher now.

M: Has politics been your primary occupation?

G: Well, it has taken the most of my time, yes. See, I was elected in 1952 to the Legislature, and I have been elected since, every two

years, either to the Legislature or to Congress. So since 1952 until now I have been in public office, and have had a re-election every two years.

M: Do you have any other occupational interests?

G: When I was in the Legislature I had the time and I practiced law-- first by myself and then with a law firm. We had a very nice little law practice there. Since coming to Congress in January of '65 I have devoted all my time to being a member of Congress and do not practice law.

M: From what you said earlier, Congressman, about the experiences during your youth in Mission, and the success that your generation there went on to achieve, how do you account for the different experiences that Mexican Americans have had, in your generation, in other parts of the Southwest? [How do you account for the fact] that very few people have gone on to achieve in our society?

G: I think the major problem there has been the educational facilities available, one; the educational background, two. Let me first go back to mine. I think the positive side of mine was that the little city of Mission was founded by a few families, and basically those families knew each other as friends and acquaintances, whether you were named Conway or Garza. So, the children of the community, myself included, were the children of the community; and it was so small that there wasn't really the opportunity for someone to discriminate. There were just so few people. And that was one of the major reasons I think that we didn't have this. For example, I won't name the city, but if you go to the city in West Texas where they were all Anglo Americans and the first Mexican Americans that came in there would be those who came to pick the cotton--this lent itself very readily to

segregation or separation. Hence they initiated the separate school, the separate neighborhood, and so on. As contrasted to our area, it was basically by choice in the beginning, with no outward sign of "the north side is better than the south side" because we had as many poor on either side at the time. The few families who were the business families--Conway, Benson (the family of Senator Benson), for example--were not wealthier than the Longoria or Martínez or Guerra on our side. So, there was equilibrium there with the wealth at the time, and hence it made it easier for all people to live together. Not so in other areas, I think. I used West Texas because I've had some acquaintance with that, where the Anglo was not really educated at a much higher level than the Mexican American who came to pick the cotton. This is one of the sad things about discrimination: it's ignorance, and I think many people will agree now. In order for them to show their superiority, which all being children of God none had, they had no other recourse than to discriminate. I think this is sad, and I think we're still seeing some of the products even today of that type of discrimination that existed. I use West Texas, but it happened in other areas around us. I speak only of Mission Texas, but even within our valley the same thing occurred.

M: Let's stay with the achievements of your generation, but look at it nationwide. As you have met many people throughout the Southwest who hold important positions in politics, business, education, and in the different fields, have you noticed a correlation between success and skin complexion? That is, people who have light complexion occupying most of these positions?

G: No. I don't know that I've ever noticed that. But I would doubt it

within our area because we have some of the Mexican American group that is blond and blue-eyed, for example, there in Mission. I'm thinking of one in particular; he's younger than I am. He's not one of the most successful; he works and he has a nice living. But we call him "el güero." But I don't think his being blond and blue-eyed made any great difference as to whether he would be the Congressman or I would be the Congressman. Throughout the United States, none of the wealthy Mexican Americans that I have met--I mean wealthy in the million types--have very light skin. [I'm talking about] most of those who have made it big in California, in Colorado, Arizona, Dallas, San Antonio, Houston; those who have made it big. Now, you'd say that I am a member of Congress; well, my bank account is very low compared to some of these people who have gone into business, and most of them are not light complected. I would say to the contrary--that the Mexican American with darker skin has achieved more monetarywise in the business world than those with the light skin.

M: Would you care to speculate on the reasons behind that? That seems contradictory to the view that most people would have.

G: Oh, I don't know that there's any rhyme or reason to it. I'm going to use a name because I think they should be an example: the Cuéllar family of Dallas. They have the El Chico Corporation, which is a multi-million dollar corporation. Their mother started a little restaurant and they all worked in the restaurant. From the one restaurant they went to two, three, four, five; and now they have fifty, sixty of them throughout the United States--major Mexican food products and so on. And they're all dark skinned, my taint of dark skin, I guess. So, I think the availability of luck [is the

reason]. But that the lighter complected one has been elected to public office or has achieved more, I don't think bears out--at least from my personal experience.

M: Congressman, what do you consider to have been your big successes and your big setbacks in life, and how do you account for both of these?

G: Well, I have been very fortunate. I guess the good Lord has been good to me. I know He has; I don't guess. Probably my greatest success is to have been elected a member of the Congress of the United States. As I said, it's a long, long ways from the banks of the Río Grande to the banks of the Potomac; and shining shoes on the streets of Mission to the Congress is a long way. So I would think that probably that has been my major accomplishment. Setbacks--I really don't remember any major setback. I haven't achieved all that I would like to achieve. Having dedicated most of my life--now almost half of my life--to public service, you can imagine I'm not a wealthy man. The availability of outside income is there, but in order to keep your nose clean and not to have any area that someone could point as a conflict of interest, I haven't ventured into business like most of my colleagues have in my area. So even though I may be "The Congressman," most of my colleagues who have stayed home have fared better financially than I have. So, I guess that would be a setback if you would call it a setback. I don't think so. I'm satisfied that I have achieved more for the people of my area and, indirectly, hopefully for the Mexican American by keeping my nose clean and setting the example and working the best I could for their interest. But I don't remember anything that has happened in my life that I would consider a major setback that I would sit back and grieve about. I

don't think I've ever had anything happen to me that I couldn't get up the next morning and go to it again. I've been very fortunate. I have a wonderful wife and three wonderful children, and my parents are still alive. Most of my family is around us, and we have what we would consider a very happy life. We have many friends; we've done a lot of things; we've seen our group come from shining shoes to being doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, independent businessmen at every level; and so life has been good to me. I have no complaints.

M: What is your present view on assimilation, and have you always held this view that you hold now?

G: Yes. I don't know that I'm speaking different than I have spoken all along. By assimilation, again, I don't know what you mean--intermarriage, moving, leaving your basic ethnic cultural background, and so on. I'll give you my viewpoint. Each individual has a basic inherent heritage familywise that all of us want to keep-- a pride in your family. This is probably a little more so in the Spanish-speaking or the Mexican American or the Spanish/Mexican culture, whichever way you define it, as contrasted to some other ethnic backgrounds. Now, this, I think, is very, very important. The business, social assimilation, I think, is also very important. Not that you have a schizophrenic attitude, but it's very important and has always been that one know from whence he came. One of the reasons for your interview I think [is] that we have the pride in saying, "Well, I am a Mexican American. This has been, in the whole, our contribution." For example, people ask me, "What has been your [area's] contribution to the Bicentennial?" Well, our area was not a part of the United States in 1776, but as I told a lady recently, "It was my people that discovered the whole Western hemisphere; it was the Spaniards who sent Columbus. So our participation in the Becentennial," I said, "should be that of those who began the whole

operation." The founding of the institutions in the Western Hemisphere was from part of our ethnic background in México, of course. Before the white man came we had (and I say "we" collectively as a descendent of someone who was born in México) the pyramids. We had organized society; we had medicine even to conducting surgery; we had zoological gardens; there was a beautiful zoo (if you read a book about the daily life of the Aztecs). So our contribution is two-fold. One is having discovered the whole hemisphere. But before that, as contrasted to the original American Indian from north of the U.S.-México line, they did not have the civilization that our Indian ancestors had in the South. So, that should be preserved; that must be preserved, but not to the extent now that you segregate yourself, like I think some of our brothers are doing, segregating themselves. Because pride of your ethnic background can only be shown when you're with those not of your ethnic background, because it won't do any good for you and I to sit here and pound our chests and say, "You're a Mexican American and I'm a Mexican American, and look how great we are." We achieve nothing. So that inherent pride that I think everyone has, and I think that we should foster and develop, should be only so that we can then assimilate with other groups, that we can then show that we have made this contribution. And in the assimilation process, whether my intermarriage or moving to areas where you don't have as many Mexican Americans or so on, you will stand out as saying, "I am proud of from whence I came, but I am not letting that separate me from my involvement in the American institution as we know it today."

M: What is your opinion, Congressman, regarding the reasons for the lack of proportional political representation in the Mexican American

community throughout the Southwest? Why do we have so few representatives?

G: Well, I think probably it's our own fault. One [reason is] that we have had, in some areas that I'm acquainted with, those who are just too busy making a living and they haven't gotten involved in the political atmosphere. Secondly, and I face it every day, is that we split ourselves up. We don't have the unity that, for example, the Blacks have, for many reasons. The main one, probably, is a question of geography because the Mexican American from California can be as different as black and white to the Mexican American from the Río Grande Valley in not even speaking the same dialect, as you call it. The same from Colorado, from New Mexico, Arizona. You have the levels of migration: the original families, like in my area, all the way down to the latest little wetback that came across. They bring different ideology, a different background, from the area they came from in México. Someone coming from el norte, from the north of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, is a vastly different person from the little Indian that comes from Oaxaca. The little Indian from Oaxaca may have gone to California and the norteno from Monterrey came to McAllen or Mission, Texas; and those two can't communicate. We haven't had the cohesiveness; we haven't had the mutuality of desire. Because of your backgrounds, many times you desire different things. And, sad to say, there always has been a certain element of jealousy--that it seems that one of us achieves some position of importance and there's always one who wants to knock you out. I'm having to go through that right now. I will have an opponent this next election--one of my own ethnic background--who says I'm too conservative and

therefore he is more liberal; and he's going to try and knock me out. That's why we don't have as many, because in many instances this jealousy or hatred goes so far beyond the norm that they will support somebody named Smith as against a Garza just for the spite of knocking Garza out. But, this is a human element; and you're dealing with humans and you can't eradicate that.

M: Mr. Congressman, I'd like to ask you a question regarding your feelings toward México. What is your view of the social, political, and economic conditions in that country?

G: Well, first, my feelings towards México, of course, have always been very close because we live right on the border. Our family, because of history, was split down the middle and we had relatives on one side or another of the river, as many [people] have in that area. Hence, you feel kindlier towards a country where you know your family are citizens of. Also since our area was a part of México, we basically have a feeling of closeness and association with it. Now, in relation to their social-economic evolution, I think they've come a long way in spite of all of the obstacles they have had. Certainly, no major country in the world has had the setbacks or the upheavals that México has had throughout its history, with what they call revolutions; but basically they were civil wars within the different factions there, as late as the Revolution of 1915 ([which] is commonly known). But I feel that the stabilizing of the democratic institution in México (within some restrictions that I don't agree with), I think, has given the people more freedom than basically they would have otherwise; it has given México more stability than they would have had otherwise. By "restrictions," I mean their basically one party system--the inherent power that the government has. But I think that those who have governed México, at least the last five Presi-

dents that I have known personally and have worked with on mutual problems, have tried to bring México to a forefront as a modern nation. Now, there is some disagreement between my Mexican colleagues in the government and myself as to whether they are a developing nation or a developed [nation]; and I insist that they are developed. They insist they are still developing, and want us to give them all of the assistance that we would [give to] a developing country. And yet they compete, in many instances, with products of my area openly in the open market as a developed country. But this is just a friendly disagreement. I think that México has still a long ways to go because of the geography of the area--they still have many isolated, many rural areas in México that yet have not come into the 20th century. But certainly the developed areas of México--the industry, the education, the personal lives of the people--have now been enhanced to the position where you would have what we would know as a middle class, that for many years did not exist in any of these countries similar to México--you had only the rich and the poor. So, to sum it briefly, I have a very friendly attitude towards México for obvious reasons, and I think that they have done above and beyond really, within the restrictions that their government has, and have done a lot for their people.

M: I'd like to ask you a question regarding the relations between the people who live north of the River and the people who live on the other side in the district which you represent. How would you characterize those relations between the two societies?

G: In our area it's the same people--there's no difference. Very cordial, very friendly. As a matter of fact, I think it even causes problems sometimes that no one looks at the River as a division between two

countries. You just cross the River and you're in México. But many times an American citizen may run afoul of the law in México, for example, and he'll say, "Well, I demand my Constitutional rights," having forgotten that he crossed the River and went into a foreign country. Sometimes it seems an aggravation having to go through Immigration [and] customs as you go back and forth across the river. The area of the Lower Río Grande Valley is where you have Brownsville-Matamoros, and then below Weslaco you have a little town called Progreso and Nuevo Progreso, and then McAllen and Mission have Reynosa across. And then up the river we have some [others]. There's no difference; it's the same people. We shop on their side, they shop on ours; we crisscross that border like it wasn't there.

M: There is, to a significant extent, some economic competition taking place between the two sides. Has that caused any problems since you have lived there?

G: Well, among the people, no. With the government, yes; because México considers itself a developing country. Periodically the Mexican government will just say, "OK, you can't bring anything back from the United States." And our merchants on our side who sell a lot to Mexicans coming across hit the ceiling--this type of problem. But the problem is amongst the businessmen themselves. It's a competitive spirit like one store to the other, whether you're on one side or [the other]. As a matter of fact, to the contrary, I think they supplement themselves. My area now is attracting tourists, and they're trying to bring conventions and so on; and part of the package is that "We will take you to shop on the Mexican side, to go to the nightclubs," and so on. Now, our area's sold as part of a package; they want the people to go across to México. And the Mexicans on

the Mexican side are doing the same thing--they're trying to attract people from the interior of México to come to the border; and then once on the border they just skip across to our side supplementing what we have for [what] they don't have, and vice versa.

M: Now, México has initiated this program that they've called los artículos gancho to allow the importation of these free-duty commodities into their stores on the other side. Has this caused any bad feelings among American merchants?

G: No, not really; not in our area. The Chambers of Commerce work hand-in-hand on both sides of the river. They work together real well.

M: I'd like to ask you a question about your representation of Mexican Americans in your district. Have you found it difficult to represent their interests, given the split constituency that you have?

G: Well, yes, it is difficult. It's not difficult as far as representing the interests of the area--business, agriculture, educationwise, and so on. That's not a problem. Really, the problem has been from the outside. There are people here in Washington, for example, who make a living of ethnic legislation--they want to ethnicize (if there's such a word) everything. Like, I would introduce a bill, let's say, to provide for school lunches in the schools. There are those people, mostly from the outside, who say, "No, you should introduce a bill for school lunches for Mexican Americans." And my theory has always been: if a fellow hasn't got a job; if a child needs education, the best thing to do is to get the legislation that gives them the availability of that education. Now, when you have specific problems, OK--like the bilingual program or problems specifically related. But [if] a fellow doesn't have a job, I try to get him a job whether his name is González or Smith. So, the main problem of the

division--Mexican American, other Latin (because I have a few Cubans, Puerto Ricans and so on)--has been from the professional (I hate to use that word) agitator from the outside who lives over here in a vacuum and says, "This is the way it should be down there." They want to Mexicanize everything; and many times you can't because a hungry child is a hungry child. And I don't look at its name; I try to get food for the parents and for that child. So, that has caused a problem.

M: Sir, what is your view of the Raza Unida Party?

G: Well, I haven't any great feeling about them. I think that in the beginning, in the area where they began, they served a useful purpose. Unfortunately, as always, I think many wrong people have gotten into the forefront to use it for personal, private gain. They now seem to have problems within the ranks. But I respect everyone's right to belong to a political party. And if one decides that he wants to belong to a political party called Raza Unida, within our system that's his privilege and I respect it.

M: Do you see what has happened in Crystal City as a good thing?

G: Well, I used to represent Crystal City, and I think some good has come from it; a lot of bad has come from it. They have divided families against themselves. They have fought amongst each other; they have in many instances in the schools taught what I considered racism and hatred against not only the Anglo but against anyone who disagreed with them. I think this is bad. So, when I first ran for Congress, I had Zavala County and I made many friends and I worked with them there. And I helped the original Mexican Americans get elected to office in Crystal City. This is before there ever was a Raza Unida. So, my association in that area goes before the Raza Unida, and I

helped as best I could. The problem now has evolved to an autocratic thing for the leadership. You agree with them; and if not you're against them and you're no good and you're an Uncle Tom. I don't think this is good.

M: How has your ideology changed over time and why? Or has it?

G: I don't know that it has. I think my basic feelings are the same I've always had. There may be some evolutionary process as to the needs of my community, for example, but the ideology hasn't changed--it's always been the same.

M: How would you label yourself politically?

G: Well, how does that go? "I am a child of God, an American, and a Democrat in that order." I think within the scope of the Democratic Party I fall somewhere in the center.

M: Congressman, who have been your heroes or the persons you would have liked to emulate?

G: Oh, it's a long list. From our area, there was a Licenciado J. T. Canales. Some names you may not recognize, but probably in your research they will [come up]. And then there was a lawyer named M. C. González; there was Alonso Perales. I was a great admirer of Gustavo García from San Antonio. I had a lot of admiration for an old priest, Father _____ whom I still see periodically. I served my first mass as an altarboy for him, and he's 97 years old now. Oh, I was a great admirer of, of course, the sports figures (I am still)--Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, some great football players; too long a list.

M: Any Anglo American historical figures?

G: Yes. Probably in the history, Abraham Lincoln would be my major one. Of course, Jack Kennedy I admire--President Kennedy. Some of the people in the sports, of course, both Anglo and Mexican American.

But of my involvement in the government, I probably have studied more and have read more, I think, on Lincoln than on any other.

M: Can you tell me why you admired Kennedy?

G: I guess for that same reason that everybody else did. I think probably one of the greatest reasons of my admiration of Kennedy is--I don't know if you'd call it admiration or what--was [this]: my knowledge of politics, my personal involvement, my personal recollection, the Presidents that I knew or recognized were Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower; and that was it. So Kennedy was the young man, although he wasn't of my immediate generation. You might say he almost was. So it was the youth part of it, I think, that [made] you relate to him more than you would have to Roosevelt or Truman or Eisenhower (which are the only Presidents that I personally remembered, because even though I was living I didn't remember Herbert Hoover because I was pretty young). So he appealed to the young people. I met him and I had worked for him, and I worked in his campaign. In the very brief visits that I had with him, he appeared to be genuinely interested in the people themselves. I got the feeling, going back to Judge Strickland, that when you spoke with him, he didn't look down at you; he sort of spoke at your own level. So that was one of the reasons [I] worked real hard for him. I was in the State legislature; I was not up here while he was President. And I was working in Austin, for his arrival to Austin, when he was killed in Dallas; and he never got to the dinner that I was working on in Austin. But, the main thing was that he somehow seemed to be one of my generation.

M: How much opportunity do you perceive there to be for Mexican Americans in the United States now?

G: It's unlimited now. Even to the Black who has suffered much more, I think that the opportunity is unlimited. You have to have, of course, the inherent desire; you have to have some semblance of education--although I don't agree with the theory that everyone has to have a formal education to be a success. I know many successful people, both financial and personal successes, who've had no education. But in the modern day it helps. But if a kid could shine shoes in the streets of Mission, Texas, and get to the Congress of the United States, anybody else can. I think that would sum it up in my life--that the availability of achievement or for achieving is there. Now, you may not have the clothes; you may not eat the best steaks; you may not have the best car; you may not live in the best house; but I don't know of anyone who can really and truly say, "I cannot get an education." I don't know of anyone that can really and truly say, "The purposeful obstacles are there, put by people intentionally to keep me from succeeding." I think we have passed that barrier in the United States. I hope that everyone would agree. I could make it, [even though] I wasn't the smartest one, I wasn't wealthy; I just had my desire and a lot of help from a lot of people, and God was good to me. But, if it happened to me, I think it can happen to anyone.

M: Of course, somebody might answer that you are the great exception and that, in fact, very few people of your generation have gone on to achieve what you have achieved. So, the norm has been non-achievement. How would you answer that?

G: Well, like I say--of my group and my generation, this hasn't been the case in my area. In other areas, maybe; I speak from my own little world. Maybe it is different in Los Angeles or El Paso, I don't

know. I think maybe I better correct that. I would limit this to my personal experience. Maybe there would be some obstacles in some places. I don't know of any, and certainly we're trying here, from the federal government side, to try and remove any barriers that would be placed from people achieving their maximum potential. Perhaps there are areas, I don't know. I see it all around me, though. They're coming up here--teachers, college professors. The colleges in the area that I am acquainted with (where we are) have a preponderance of Mexican Americans, and so are the classes: Pan American University in Edinburg [has] 80-85% Mexican American going on to finish. Now, I don't know what it would be, for example, in El Paso or in California. I understand probably that California has more Mexican Americans, but less have achieved their maximum potential. Maybe that would be the case; so I guess I had better temper my enthusiasm to say that within the area that I am acquainted with, I feel that the availability has been there, and certainly it's here in Washington. They come from all over, from all sources, from all areas. [As to] the availability of political jobs, the higher level political jobs, that is a very simple answer. It's because of lack of involvement in the beginning, because only those that are involved in the close proximity of a Presidential race, for example, are going to be members of the Cabinet or the higher government officials. So, why don't some of ours get involved? I'm sure if they would, they would be in that kind of position. But we haven't had the availability of the candidates. For example, the candidates for the higher political offices--the Presidency of course (with the exception of Lyndon Johnson)--have come from other areas; so their nucleus of their people would come from other areas. Johnson really didn't have his own making. That's one of the regrets

I have from the Johnson administration. He of necessity had to follow President Kennedy; unfortunately it came that way. But he never really began a "Johnson administration." I felt certain that if Johnson had come into the Presidency on his own we would have had a Mexican American Cabinet member. I feel very strongly that we would have; but Johnson inherited and kept the group that had been selected by Kennedy, or those within the sphere of that original Kennedy-Johnson ticket. But, certainly the availability is here. We have had some in major places. Again, I go back. The main problem, though, has been that once you get them in a position of leadership, our own people start shooting at them; and that has been the major problem. All that I know of [those] who have served in high positions, it has been our own people who have been their main detractors.

M: One final question, Congressman. What is your view of the Chicano movement?

G: Well, I don't know what the Chicano movement is. Everyone has his own definition for it. I get letters sometimes, "What's the definition of the word 'Chicano'?" I don't know what it is. All I say is, if some person wants to call himself Chicano, that's his privilege. If he wants to call himself Mexican American, Latin American, Spanish American, that's his privilege. I have no grudge with that.

M: What is your own preference?

G: Well, I basically don't call myself anything. I wait to see what the other person calls me; and if I have no disagreement with it, I go along. I have many constituents who'll say, "My Chicano brother"; and if he's my friend or he speaks to me with respect and he calls me a Chicano, that's his privilege and I will respond as such. So I have climatized my life to answer because of my travels throughout

the United States; and it depends where you are and what the people call themselves there. Now, I don't agree with the group who call themselves Chicano and go around barefoot with beards and unbathed. If "Chicano" is a synonym for "Mexican American," for "Spanish-speaking," and I have to fit into that category, I don't want to do that. But if someone says, "I am a Chicano because I am of Mexican origin or Mexican American origin," well, that's fine with me. But the Chicano movement that one person mentions may be different to another person. There are groups in the colleges and universities now [which have] Chicano Study, which is basically not that; because they're talking in many instances of "Mexican, México" heritage, culture, and so on. And I think this is a misnomer sometimes. But it does so much more good that I have no quarrel with the name, because I'm happy and proud to see that the University of Washington or the University of Oregon, or Harvard or Yale has Chicano Studies. The name means little when you know the good that will come from it. But it's a misnomer when they're going to your basic Mexican heritage and culture. So, with that reservation --if all that someone speaks about is [that] he has a picture of Zapata with the bullet belts across his chest and the rifle and he goes around with dirty blue jeans and no shoes on, and he says, "This is the Chicano movement" --with that I don't personally agree; but again that's their privilege to do so. But if they say Chicano/Mexican heritage and culture, that's fine with me. My disagreement with that other group is that [for example], that's fine-- Zapata is one person of one era of México. But yet México has so much of our basic culture heritagewise--music, poetry, great writers, great poets and musicians--good music from classical down to the folk

music. So I want somebody who ties down my ethnic background and in some way obligates me to look into all of that cultural aspect. If you want to, you can call it Chicano, you can call it Mexican American or Mexican ancestry, whatever. My only requisite is that you look at it as a whole and allow the difference; because the music of the north of Tamaulipas will be vastly different from that of Oaxaca, entirely different from Veracruz, and we have the Tex-Mex on our side of the river--the polka with the accordión and the guitarra. I want all of that to be woven in, so you can't give it any one name. So, Chicano movement? I don't know that there is any such thing as a Chicano movement, except [for a] very small group that I wouldn't want to be categorized [in]--that in order to be a proud Chicano I had to put on some dirty blue jeans.

M: A related question would be: What is your opinion about this concept of Aztlán that some people talk about?

G: Well, [it's] that it's going to be their Mecca, or it's going to be their Utopia that we're going to reconquer. I have no grudge with anybody adhering to this principle. I don't agree with it. The President of México doesn't agree with it--that I know personally. I think if they would just temper their desires to dwelling on the culture, on the heritage, and leave the conquest [out] of it, it would be helpful and beneficial to the Mexican American--to go back into the culture of the ancient heritage that we have from (of course everyone says) the Aztecs. But good gosh, there were hundreds of different tribes of Indians in México before the white men ever came. We say "the bronze people," the Aztecas; but there are now existing in México 40 or 50 different tribal descendents as of this day, with

the different dialects and so on. But the Plan of Aztlán, as far as the culture and the heritage, I think it would be good. But saying that we are going to conquer and bring back to our people--I don't know that we would be capable of governing it.

M: Congressman, is there something else that you would like to add?
I have exhausted the questions here.

G: Well, there's so much. Where would one end and where would one start? My only hope is that my contribution here will somehow prove of interest to somebody in the future. I hope it might be helpful to someone. Certainly, there would be many who would disagree with my views, my philosophy, my theories; but that's the beauty of this country and our system--that anyone can do that. But I would say that the only thing I could add would be that the best thing that one could do would be [this]: the mind, the intellect has that tremendous capacity to somehow put aside bad experiences and look only to good ones. And if we could do that as a people--whether we call ourselves Spanish-speaking, Mexican Americans, and so on--if we could sift through the whole background and take out all of the good and put it together and use it as a tool to make things better, I think probably this would be the culminating point. This would be giving victory to our heritage by remaining with that heritage, but assimilating into the mainstream of Main Street U.S.A. That would be the greatest benefit we could do for that heritage, and to correct the things that have gone wrong without hatred and without revenge, to try and correct the deficiencies in a positive way. I think probably this would be the greatest tribute that we could pay; because everything you say about "I'm proud to be a Chicano," or "I'm proud to be a Mexican American," is not that you're

proud of you, but that you're proud of those who came before you.

So therefore we have an obligation to those of whom we are proud, to see that that pride evolves into positive, fruitful development of that culture and that heritage.

M: Congressman De la Garza, thank you very much for a most interesting and stimulating interview.