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## Interview no. 215

Mike Romo

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO  
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mike Romo (1892-1980)  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_  
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime member of LULAC.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; Anglo/Mexican relations in Brackettville and El Paso; early relations between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez; origin of the word "Chicano"; last days of the Mexican Revolution; Ciudad Juárez during Prohibition; work with LULAC; impressions of the Chicano Movement.

1 3/4 hours.  
34 pages.

MIKE ROMO

M: This is an interview with Mr. Mike Romo of 8101 Freedom Street, El Paso, Texas, the 7th day of October, 1975. Conducting the interview are Oscar Martínez and Sarah John.

First of all, Mr. Romo, can you tell us when and where you were born?

R: I was born in another town in East Texas. It's called Brackettville. It's just across the river from Fort Clark. I was born there February 15, 1892. That's just 400 years after Columbus discovered America.

M: What city is close by to where you were born?

R: Del Río is one; [it's] only 30 miles [from there], and San Antonio is about 150 miles from there.

M: So you were born very close to the border?

R: Oh yes. In fact, we used to go to Eagle Pass every Sunday just to go over to Ciudad Porfirio Díaz. Every Sunday my grandmother and my father would drive over there.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents--a little bit about their background?

R: My grandfather on my father's side is a native of a little town called Rancho Nuevo. That's about 30 miles from Cuatro Ciénegas in the state of Coahuila. My father left (I don't know what age he was, but he was a young man) with the idea of crossing into the United States. He crossed at Laredo. Now, instead of going towards San Antonio, I don't know how it came about, but he came up to Brackettville; and there he met my mother, of course, and he married her. I don't know much about my grandfather on my mother's side, but I do know about my grandmother. Her oldest son (my mother's brother) had a ranch up in the north side of

Brackettville, a place they call Nueces. He had a timber ranch there and also cattle. But where he made his money was selling cedar poles to the government. My father was a carpenter, and a very good carpenter. He contracted and made several buildings in Brackettville. But during the Aguinaldo Revolution my oldest brother was working with a Captain in Fort Bliss--Captain Hornbrook. And then Captain Hornbrook was called to the Philippines, so my brother went with him. He was his chauffeur; he chauffeured his electric cars. So he used to take care of that electric car and then run errands [for] the Captain. The Captain himself was a millionaire. They owned in Santa Barbara, California, a hotel called the Hornbrook Hotel. So my brother Alvino went over there. (I have two brothers, Alvino and Abel.) When Alvino came back here, he got a job at the Union Station here in El Paso, So he had a good job. Then he decided the folks ought to be in El Paso. He sent money to my daddy and so forth and we all came to live in El Paso. That was in 1906 and I've been here since.

M: Let me ask you some questions about your childhood there in your hometown. What do you remember about life during those days?

R: It was very funny. As I said, my uncle had a ranch up in Nueces, and my aunt had a very nice home. She had a lot of fruit trees around there. I think, it was about three acres of land. She had a lot of chickens, but those chickens would lay out in the bushes. They wouldn't go into the chicken coop. So it was my job to go and collect those eggs. Well, my mother passed away when I was 6 months old, so my father remarried several years after and I had a very good stepmother. She was a fine woman. Once in a while she would send me to my aunt for eggs. My aunt sold those eggs at 10¢ a dozen. When she charged me 10¢ a dozen,

I got mad. I got very angry and I said, "I will never come back and collect your eggs again! You should sell them to me for a nickle a dozen!" That's one incident I can remember. I had an uncle that was, what you would call, a traveling agent. He had a wagon and he filled it up with everything that could be sold, and he took it out into the towns like San Angelo and around there where they sheared sheep. I would go with him, and we'd come as far as Pecos over here. I knew old Judge Bean; I knew him well. In fact, my uncle used to like to take his drink; and so when he went and stopped there [to feed] the horses, he went in the bar. It was too hot under the wagon, so I'd get under the steps of Judge Bean's saloon there. I would get under the steps and fall asleep there. So we went around peddling. That was exactly the word--peddling. He peddled shirts and underwear and pins and capes--whatever was saleable around where they sheared sheep.

M: Was it a good business?

R: Yes. And then as I grew a little bit older I began to sell the Saturday Evening Post and the Chicago Ledger. I was somewhere around five years old, and Mr. Holmes that owned a drug store in Brackettville hired me to help around the store there. So I did that work. But I've always believed that you've got to keep active; if you want to do anything, you've got to keep going. Then when I came to El Paso, my cousin, Víctor Ramírez, had a drug store at the corner of Fifth and El Paso. So I went to work with him and I learned a little about the drug business. And when I was about 15 or 16 years old, Mr. White had a drug store on Oregon Street, so I went to work with him until he became U.S. Marshall here. Then he gave me a job as a Deputy Marshall to take prisoners to Fort Leavenworth and wherever they sent them.

M: You started working at a very early age then.

R: Oh yes. I was maybe about 4 years old.

M: Let me ask you about your experiences in school. When you first started school, what do you remember about that?

R: Very little, because I only went to the second grade. Now, I picked up my education from traveling and then going to night school. I went to \_\_\_\_\_ College here, for instance. I kind of liked Court Reporter; I was taking that up. So I attended that college for about 3 years. That's the only college [I attended]. Outside of that, I picked up whatever I've learned in reading and so forth.

M: What is the reason for your only going to the second grade?

R: The reason was, first, as I said, I was an orphan. We three--Alvino, Abel and myself--were orphans. While Abel went to the 10th grade and Alvino went to the 12th grade, I [went] only to the 2nd grade because of changing conditions. We would have to change here and there. In other words, I figured that I had to work and forget about school. That's the way it was.

M: What other jobs did you have before coming to El Paso in that town?

R: Selling newspapers, shining shoes, working in that drug store and so forth.

M: Do you remember any interesting experiences, in these jobs, that you can tell us about?

R: Mr. Holmes was very peculiar, you might call him. In other words, there were some kids that would come in and want to see if you wanted a shine. One time a customer said, "Yes, I'll take a shine," and then Mr. Holmes told me, "Put that kid out. We don't want no shining in the drug store." So I tried to put him out and he pushed me. And I just leaned over and kicked him. He finally went out, and he threw that shoe pan at me

but it missed me! That's about the only incident that I can remember. Of course, my Aunt Lupe also had not only chickens [and] turkeys, but she had a lot of hogs too. We used to go up to Fort Bliss and they would put all the slop in cans. I had a friend that had a little cart and he and I would go and get it and bring it over to my aunt. I don't quite remember much, except that I did sell the newspaper--the Brackettville News, the Chicago Ledger, the Saturday Evening Post. I had my customers on that--mostly newspaper.

M: The kids that did the same thing that you were doing--shining shoes, selling newspapers--were these mostly Mexican kids or also Anglo kids?

R: Most of those were Mexican kids.

M: How were the Mexicans treated in that town?

R: Well, as far as Brackettville, we were treated right. There was not discrimination. Now, of course, it was a little town, and so was Del Rio, you know. Where you would find discrimination is after you left Sanderson this way. Then it was kind of hard here with the ranchers. It was mostly the ranchers that were sort of discriminating.

M: Do you remember any incidents there?

R: Well, the only one I can remember [is] when I first started working with the Hoover Company. There used to be, where the State National Bank is now, a hotel called the Lockey Hotel; I forget the owner's name. Working with the Hoover Company as District Manager, I had about eight men out selling and I had two as servicemen. At that time we used to give the service free. If you had bought a Hoover and something had gone wrong and had called in, out would go a serviceman and he'd fix it for you for free. There was no charge in those days. One time my serviceman came over to the Lockey Hotel. I don't know for what

reason, but I got after the boy afterwards and I said, "What did you do? Why was that lady angry?" "Well, she wanted me to put new brushes in there, and she wouldn't pay for them." So, she wrote the Hoover Company and the Hoover Company sent me the letter back, but I didn't keep it. It made me a little angry and I just tore it up. But she wrote [and] said, "Why have a Mexican as District Manager here when we have a lot of Americans, a lot of white people here? Why have a Mexican as District Manager?" That's the way her letter was [written]. The company then sent me the letter back and I should have held on to it, but I never did. I just threw it out.

M: Yeah, you should have kept it. What are your impressions of Del Río during those days?

R: We used to go often because we had an aunt living there. This same uncle that was a peddler lived in Del Río. They had a store there in Del Río. The only thing I can remember that affected me is the fact that there was a very beautiful girl there and a nice looking young man. Villarreal was his name. They lived across the street. For some reason or other, one night after a dance (they had had a dance somewhere) he was bringing them home and they had an argument there. I learned about it after the police had gotten there and all of that. But, they got into an argument and he stabbed this girl and she died. We went out there, but all we could learn was that Villarreal had stabbed this woman. That's about the only incident; that's the worst.

M: Did you cross over to the other side often?

R: Oh yes. But there was no bridge then or anything. You had to go in a little boat. The same here. They used to have a boat here before this bridge was built.



M: What do you remember about the other side, Ciudad Acuña? What kind of town was it?

R: Well, as I can remember, it was not more than 25 houses in the whole town. I can't remember it very well, but we used to go when they had 16th of September celebrations and things of that kind.

M: Was it a custom for Mexican people to go over there during holidays?

R: Yes, yes. Sometimes we'd go to Ciudad Acuña and sometimes we'd go to Ciudad Porfirio Díaz. That was also 30 miles from Brackettville; Eagle Pass is right close by.

M: Did you go shopping in those towns also?

R: Well, at Ciudad Porfirio Díaz I had an uncle that was an engineer between Ciudad Porfirio Díaz and a little town they called Reata, the other side of Monclova. As a kid, when I wanted to go and see my parents at Rancho Nuevo, I'd get on the engine and I'd sit down there. The other trainmen knew me pretty well and they'd pick me up and take me. Well, at Monclova I was sitting down in the waiting room, and my brother Alvino here in El Paso had sent me a watch as a birthday present--one of those Ingerson dollar watches. I was very proud of it. So while I was waiting for the train I fell asleep. When I woke up, there was no watch. I had no watch! So I told the ticketman. He said he didn't see anybody, but if he'd find out he'd let me know. Well, it wasn't long before the trainmen came looking for me and I got on the engine and went to Rancho Nuevo. But my uncle was an engineer of a passenger train. He used to run passengers between Ciudad Porfirio Díaz and Reata. That's, oh I guess it must be 500 miles' distance. But I would get off before he'd get up to Reata. I'd get off at Monclova because from Monclova then the train goes to Cuatro Ciénegas.

M: Do you remember anything about the Free Zone--la Zona Libre?

R: You mean where people came and brought things over?

M: Yeah. Without having to pay duty.

R: Well, this same uncle that had this ranch used to take horses and mules over to México and he'd bring cattle, and nobody ever bothered him.

Now, when I was around 16 years old, I used to go to Juárez to dances.

There's where I met my wife. That is, I met her this way: She was a little kid about 12 years old, I guess, and she was usually hanging on the fence there of the house. They lived in Juárez. But I can remember coming from Juárez across the bridge on Stanton Street there and they never asked you for any identification. They didn't ask you for anything.

In fact, there wasn't but one old man and he was half asleep in the soapbox back there. You could go and come back and nobody ever bothered you and you could bring in whatever you wanted and they never said anything at all. I can remember well, I was going to that Calle del Cementerio, going toward the cemetery. I remember coming at 2 or 3 in the morning from these dances--no bother, nobody ever bothered me. Once in a while I'd meet two or three guys drinking a little tequila and, well, I wanted to be friendly with them and I'd get over there and make out like I'd take a drink and then go on about my way. We walked all the way to the bridge. Nobody ever bothered you in those days.

M: In those days, was there anything between the river and 16 de Septiembre? Any houses, any shops on Lerdo and Avenida Juárez?

R: Yes. There were shops. Of course, some of them were not, you might say, as elaborate as they are today, but there were shops all along there; oh yes. There were shops and restaurants and bars, and people used to go over there.

M: In 1906 when you first got here, were those streets already populated?

R: Oh yes.

M: You came to El Paso in 1906. What job did you have then?

R: As I said, when I first came I went to work with my cousin. I helped him around the drug store. That's where I started in the drug business. Of course, he fed me and all of that, but he was just paying me \$2 a week; and I had a chance to find me a job with Scott White for \$5 a week, so I went to work for Scott White. Then later on when I quit Scott White, I went to work for a man by the name of Goldman. He had a haberdashery store at the corner of San Antonio and El Paso; I was Assistant Manager. Incidentally, I can't remember knowing any other Jewish person that liked to drink. He used to go to those races in Juárez and come back dead drunk. So his wife and I were in cahoots. She would take care of her household and then come in about 2:00 to the store. We'd hide the money and leave \$4 or \$5; and when Mr. Goldman went broke over there playing the races he'd come over [and say], "How much [do we have]?" "Well, we didn't have but \$4.50." "Why, haven't you sold anything?" "Well, there aren't any customers," although we had sold maybe \$40 or \$50 worth. So he'd stay home, then. He wouldn't go back, there wasn't enough [money]. That was Mr. Goldman. He has some relatives still living here. I forget their names.

M: What did you do for fun here in El Paso when you were 17, 18 years old? How would you spend a typical weekend?

R: Well, we did a lot of things. We used to go fishing once in a while down there by Zaragosa. Then we'd attend dances. Then we'd have picnics and things of the kind. You know where Clardy Fox Plaza is, down here on

Alameda Street? It used to be nothing but bushes there. There were only about three houses there. We used to go there and have picnics at that place--nothing but a lot of trees there then. I don't know whatever happened with them; there's a few left.

M: Was there much dating between young people on the other side and young people on this side?

R: Yes, yes. [During] my first love affair, I went over and asked the mother if I could bring my girlfriend over to a dance. On Overland Street there was a club called La Fraternal and we'd hold all our dances there. I went over, and yes she could come, provided her older sister and the other one next to her (my wife was the middle one) came along and [also] attended the dance. But the Mexican people here were revueltas all the time. It was different then. That is, there's a certain animosity today between the Mexicans on the Mexican side and the Mexicans on this side, as I see it. In those days there was nothing. You'd go and come back. A friend would bring you over to dinner or you'd go over there. It was nice--a beautiful way of living.

M: Did you prefer girls from the other side to girls from this side?

R: No, I wasn't particular, but I just happened to know this one. [Laughter] I can tell you this: There are more beautiful girls today than there were [then]. You didn't have much picking in those days. But today I see pretty girls everywhere I go, and in those days it wasn't so. They were all hard-working girls, and they wouldn't dress up or anything like that. There were very few.

M: Do you remember Stormsville, the little Mexican village in North El Paso where Rim Road is? Do you remember that?

R: Yes. They had a goat ranch up there in the beginning. When Mr. Kern came here and he began to open that, there were just goat ranches there.

He put up a big gate--you might call it a gateway only it didn't have a gate--an arch, and put Kern Place up in there. The first one to build a house there worked for the Popular. I've forgotten his name now. As you go up Stanton [it's] the first house on the left. That was the first house that was built there. But the rest of Rim Road there, that was nothing but goat ranches--sheep and goats.

M: Did only Mexicans live there?

R: Well, no. Mexican people and some American people (two, three) lived there.

M: Poor people for the most part?

R: Yes.

M: How did they live? Do you remember?

R: Well, one or two of them worked downtown somewhere and the others attended to their goats and sheep.

M: Do you remember Chihuahueta?

R: Well, now let me tell you about Chihuahueta. I've heard that name "Chicano" time and again. "El es chicano." Well, I tried to impress [on] some of the people years ago that us boys from the Second Ward are the ones that originated the word "chicano." I went one time to see Cleofas Calleros; he's a historian. He said, "No, you're wrong. That word comes from Spain. It was first used in Spain." The way I put it to him, I said, "Look, brother Cleofas. I used to live on Virginia Street down there, and we kids would not dare pass Santa Fe Street because Chihuahueta was on the other side. Once in a while we'd get into a fight there with some of the Chihuahueta boys. They would not come east of Santa Fe [and] we would not go west of Santa Fe. They called us 'pochos.' "

M: Why did they call you "pochos"?

R: I don't know. Some of our boys were a little extravagant. They'd get on a long coat and act funny. They'd call them "pochos." Well, since they called them "pochos," they called all of us down in Second Ward "pochos." So, what could we do? Then we began to put two words together--"they're mexicanos from Chihuahua"--Chihuahua mexicano. And that's what we began to call them--chicanos. Then they took [that word] from here to California, and over there they began to call them chicanos, too. I know, before I met my wife, I was going with a girl here in El Paso who lived on 9th Street by the canal. We got down to the line just this side of Santa Fe, and here comes a bunch of them. They wanted to whip me because I was with that girl. We took off. But we called them "chicanos"--Chihuahua Mexicano.

M: And they called you "pochos." That had negative connotations, didn't it?

R: Yes.

M: Did you intend for the word "chicano" to have negative connotations, too, when you called them Chicanos?

R: Yes, yes. That's [it] more or less. Because they called us "pochos," we thought we'd call them some name. When we couldn't think of something we put the two together--Chihuahua Mexicanos--chicano.

M: What meaning did it have besides bringing together Chihuahua and Mexicano?

R: Well, we thought it would sound terrible to them, to call them chicanos, you know. And some of them were not from Chihuahua, they were from further south in México, and they resented us calling them part of Chihuahua. They said, "We're not from Chihuahua. We're from Guanajuato," or somewhere down there. They resented that. They'd call us "pochos"

because, like I said, some of the boys they'd dress with a long coat like this and they'd begin to act funny.

M: Was the word "chicano" in use when you came here already, or did it start once you were here?

R: No, no. It started among us here. I had never heard of any word "chicano." But before Professor Calleros passed away, I went to his house one day and I had read so much about Chicanos coming in from California and I told him, "That word was invented here in El Paso, down in Chihuahuita." And he said, "No, you're wrong. That word comes from Spain. It was originally used in Spain." So I just let it go at that.

M: How did you feel about the word "chicano" in those days? Did you later on use it to refer to yourself?

R: Well, it didn't begin actually to be used here till about some ten years ago--maybe fifteen years ago. We all understood that when they called you "chicano" you were from México. It didn't refer to us here. But now they're using it in a nationalist type of thing.

M: How do you feel about the word now?

R: Well, as far as I'm concerned I'm a Mexican American. That's the way I feel--a Mexican American.

M: You prefer that term?

R: Yes.

M: Let me ask you about the living conditions in Chihuahuita. How was it there at that time?

R: Well, they had plenty to eat, there's no question about that; because food was cheap. I'm talking about beans. Even here ten years ago beans were cheap. But in those days, if you'd go over to Juárez you'd get a big sack full of beans for 10¢. You'd get eggs for maybe 20¢ a dozen.

You'd go over there and get a whole stack of tortillas for a dime. So, all they had to do was earn enough money to buy food with. There was no shortage of work here in those days. They all had some place to go to work; that is, the people that lived in Chihuahuita. Now, over here in the Second Ward it was different, because there were more people over here and it was harder to get located. As far as I'm concerned, I never suffered for anything to eat, because my cousin lived on St. Vrain [and] I'd go over there and eat all the time if I wanted to. But when I was uptown I used to go ahead and buy my own lunch. On what is known as Paisano now, passing Stanton on the lefthand side (it was known as Second Street then), there was a restaurant there called the Green Tree, I believe, or Green Lantern, one of the two. It was run by Chinese people. When you wanted to be a sport, when you wanted to take your girl out, you'd go there and order a Coca Cola, tea, coffee, milk, whatever you wanted, and a nice juicy T-bone steak with potatoes and beans and peas and salad and everything else. It was 25¢, but you had to be a sport to go and spend 25¢ in those days. So, there weren't any what you would call real poor people like there is today over there, in those days.

M: Now, what about Juárez? What were the conditions over there?

R: Well, it's only the last 10 years that people have begun to come up north to Juárez. But Juárez was a village, and everybody knew each other and they were all friendly. The people from here used to go over there and mix around with them. We were all one family you might say. But I blame all of those people that's been coming north to immigrate to the United States and finally settling in Juárez. That's the reason they have the conditions they have today.



M: Were there a lot of bars and centers of vice in Juárez in those days?

R: There wasn't very much what you would call "vice," but there were a lot of bars. They had vice controlled a whole lot better then than they have it today. You take one place, one little street that was about two blocks long; they had about ten policemen there. Incidentally, there were four of us that went over there one time and got all soused up, and the policeman took us to the police station. This boy had on a big hat. The policeman asked us to sit down there before the Clerk and we did, and then the policeman came and hit him on the head and he said, "Abajo petatas." To take your hat off--"abajo petatas"; just like that. Well, they inquired what we were doing, this, that and the other; and we told them we were just having a little fun. We all got fined \$2 and then they let us go. It just so happened that the other boys didn't have anything, but this other boy had a \$20 bill, so he paid the fine for us and we were let out.

M: Do you remember the Calle del Diablo?

R: Yeah, oh yeah. That started out as a small street, but it later on was extended. That Calle del Diablo was very well policed then. You never heard of any wrong doing around there. Everything was carried just right.

M: Let me ask you about your recollection of the Presidential meeting here-- President Taft and President Díaz.

R: When President Díaz came in, we were down there at San Jacinto Plaza guarding the children. I happened to run over to El Paso Street to see if the parade was coming over. I didn't have my camera then, but I happened to see President Díaz. Those soldiers, boy, they were very, what you would call very strict in the way they were marching, well dressed; and they executed their commands perfectly. So after I got a

glimpse of the Presidents, I ran over to the Plaza again. The parade came down on Santa Fe Street, came on El Paso Street and then over to the Hotel Zeiger there.

M: I read in an article that some of the officials here in El Paso had put a fence around some huts in the Mexican community to avoid embarrassment on the part of the visitors that came into El Paso. Do you remember anything about that?

R: No, I don't. That's possible, though.

M: Mr. Romo, there was an incident here in 1916. Some American engineers were killed in Santa Isabel, Chihuahua, by Villa's troops. Some of the bodies were shipped to El Paso; and since they worked for the railroad, the people in El Paso were familiar with some of the men. There was a great deal of anger on the part of Anglo Americans toward the Mexicans as a result of that incident, as well as the incident that occurred in Columbus, New Mexico, when Pancho Villa raided the place. Do you recall what happened here in El Paso at that time?

R: Well, not very well. But when they brought the bodies over, there was quite a lot of commotion. I don't remember very much about the details on that. I knew about it, but I don't recall.

M: I've read some newspaper articles about that, and a big crowd of Anglo Americans actually marched on the Mexican community. They had the intention of going [into South El Paso] and taking revenge against Mexicans for that incident. Do you recall hearing anything about that?

R: Well, along about that time I left for Tucson; and from Tucson I went to Hermosillo, Sonora. I can recall that I read about it in the paper, but I wasn't here. I read about it because the Post (not the Herald Post, but the Post) was being sent to me at Tucson. At that time I was there, and then I went to Hermosillo and stayed there [for] three years. Then I came back home again.

M: You came to El Paso in 1913?

R: No, 1905.

M: 1905. During the time of the Revolution, there were a lot of refugees from Chihuahua who came to El Paso seeking refuge from attacks on the part of the Villistas. Do you recall these refugees and what they did when they came here?

R: Well, like I said before, their housing was down in what we now call Chihuahuita--most of them. Only some of them were down around Second Ward. But I don't recall very much of an incident. I do recall the time when the Villistas attacked Juárez and the cannons were up there on top of the hill shooting over. That's all I remember.

M: The Franklin Mountains?

R: Yes. I don't remember whether it was the 7th or the 12th Cavalry that was stationed out at Fort Bliss. My wife and I and the kids lived on Overland Street. It was early in the morning when we started to hear cannons. You could hear the zoom of the cannons going right over you. It passed right over our house. So we all crawled under the bed. I told the kids to just crawl right under those beds. And the cannon went over there and destroyed the old racetrack. Soon after that, the Cavalrymen went right over into Juárez. That's what I can recall about that. But it was terrific the way it could "zoom" those cannon balls right over your head. You see, we lived over there on the 1400 block on Overland, and the cavalry, with their cannon on top of what you call Scenic Drive, started shooting and in direct line with our house. It was right over to the Juárez racetrack.

M: That must have been quite scary.

R: Oh yes, it was, it was. The kids didn't pay much attention. The two girls went to sleep; and my wife and I just got up and made a little coffee and waited to see what happened. Pretty soon we began to hear all sorts of noise--people yelling from down there. We could hear them. So I thought maybe I'd get up and go downtown. Well, I learned that bullets had hit. The revolutionary people had been shooting and the bullets came over and hit several of the buildings downtown. Nobody seemed to have gotten hurt at that time.

M: Was there a great amount of fear here in El Paso that the two countries were going to go to war?

R: Yes, yes, especially along San Antonio Street and along there. Boy, the people were scared, they were scared. Like I say, we got under the beds.

M: Did you have any contact with the more wealthy families from México who settled in the Sunset Heights area?

R: Well, yes, but I forget their names. One fellow bought that hotel next to the White House; I knew him pretty well. I forget their names now, but I did know two or three people from Chihuahua. They came here and they settled over there in what's known as Sunset Heights on W. Yandell and Mundy Avenue, around there.

M: Did these families go back to México or did they decide to stay here in El Paso?

R: One of them was here about 10 years ago and that's the last I heard of him. But the others, I think they went back to México.

M: I'd like to ask you some questions about your early employment here in El Paso. What kind of jobs did you have at first?

R: When I first came here to El Paso, I started working around drug stores.

But my brother had gone to the Philippines and he came back with Colonel Hornbrook. I started to go out there and for about three months I did odd jobs around Fort Bliss. Then my cousin set up a drug store at Fifth and El Paso and I worked for him for quite a while. Then I came to work for Scott White. Then I went to work for a man by the name of Goldman at the corner of San Antonio and El Paso [at his] haberdashery. I was the sole clerk and what you might call the Manager; I was earning good money. Actually his wife and I ran the store because he was always out there playing the horses. But as Assistant Manager (whatever you want to call it) I was being paid \$5 a week, and that was good money in those days.

M: Was it unusual for a Mexican to have a job like Assistant Manager?

R: Yes, yes, it was a little unusual at that time. You'd have to have pull, for one thing; unless the other people there knew you, they wouldn't hire you.

M: What kinds of jobs did most Mexicans have?

R: They were in stores here and there. Now, you take the laborer that came from Chihuahua. There used to be a Holmes Supply Company, contractors; they would contract laborers and then ship them on the Santa Fe. Incidentally, I forgot to tell you about that. I was maybe about 18 years old when I had a friend working for D.H. Holmes, and they needed what you would call conductors; that is, men that would take these people out. So I worked with them about a couple of years as conductor. That is, after they recruited these laborers here, I would have maybe 25 or 30, and they would put them in one car; and then we'd just drop them off along the line. Three men were wanted at this section house, five men at the other and so on. So as long as they lasted, all the way to California

I would ride on that train as conductor. Then when they were all assigned I'd come back and pick up some more and so on.

M: I have read and heard that some of these laborers were exploited by the contractors; that the contractors sometimes were not very honest in their dealings with them.

R: Well, of course, we had about 4 contractors here. But the only one I can remember is that D.H. Holmes Supply Company. They provided transportation for them, food; and also they had stores. The Holmes Company had stores at most of these little towns and they could go over there and charge for their food and so forth. Well, it is very possible that some of them did take advantage of them. For instance, I don't know whether Holmes ever did it, but these people that came over here, they were completely poor. They didn't have a cent. The D.H. Holmes provided meals for them and I judge that the rest of the contractors [did, too]. However, since they had no money, these contractors would probably advance them money or buy food for them. Now, I heard one instance where one of these contractors (I don't know who it was) was giving this boy slips to go to a store and buy. Well, I think he had bought about \$5 worth of food [and] when the contractor paid him, he paid him \$15 less; and he said, "That's how much food you got over at the store." Well, now, whether that was the truth, I don't know. That's about the only incident I've heard of, then.

M: Was there discrimination against U.S. citizens of Mexican background for employment?

R: Very much, very much. However, [it was] not as bad as it was east of El Paso, like for instance in Pecos and Fort Stockton. But in El Paso we had quite a bit of discrimination.

M: Could you tell me about that? How did it manifest itself?

R: Well, if the stores like the Popular, Heyman Krupp, and the Elite Confectionary employed any Mexican people, it was only for janitor service or dishwashers. They didn't employ them to wait on people. Now, the Popular was the first one to begin to employ Mexican people-- the Popular Dry Goods Store.

M: Why was that?

R: Well, Mr. Schwartz was partial to the Mexican people; he liked them. So he began to tell the other bosses that "We should employ these people." It paid off, because they began to get a lot of trade from Juárez afterwards. But the Popular was the first one.

M: Was there ever any organized effort on the part of Mexicans to try to get fair treatment in employment?

R: Well, we had a club here that we called it La Mutualista; but it seemed that they were afraid to go and do anything. They never made any effort to make themselves known.

M: Did you join that club at an early age?

R: No, no I didn't join it. I joined another one called La Fraternal later on, but La Fraternal was more or less just a social club.

M: When did you first start getting involved in community activities?

R: That was around 1938, when I saw that some of the people down on the South side were beginning to be discriminated against. For instance, they wouldn't rent [them] even those old houses. The excuse was that they had too many kids. But that wasn't it. They were Mexican people, and they didn't want to rent to them. So in 1938, LULAC had just been organized here. I joined them and then we began to give them help.

M: But you were not active in any of these things before 1938?

R: Not very much, no. Nobody was because, like I say, they were afraid [that] if you did anything they'd put you in jail. There was a policeman here; he was mean, boy, he was a mean policeman. He'd go along the streets, and the people might have been sitting there on the outside would go inside. In other words, a Mexican was nothing, that's all there is to it.

M: The police harassed them?

R: Yes.

M: I'd like to ask you some questions about Prohibition here during the 1920s. Do you recall conditions in El Paso then?

R: Of course, I never visited bars much; but the bars that were here were all closed at that time and all the liquor you could buy was from bootleggers. At Córdova, this river came down that way. Over here, in what you would call the island, there were three or four bars and a couple of restaurants. We used to go over there to eat. Well, in that section they would arrest people almost every day as they crossed over here, because they were smuggling liquor all the time. Some of them were in the wholesale business. They'd load up a car and try to evade the officers, but they'd be caught anyway. Just like they catch marijuana today, they were catching liquor in those days; every day, every day. But that was at Córdova Island. Córdova Island gave the Immigration or Border Patrolmen more trouble than anywhere else in El Paso; that's where all the liquor was coming from.

M: Do you recall conditions in Juárez at that time?

R: Well, yes. As far as I'm concerned, conditions in Juárez were such that you could go over there and you were welcomed all the time. Everything was quiet. Heck, I used to go over there to their dances and come back at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning walking. We would walk over, and nobody



ever bothered you then. You could go down to the south end of Juárez and walk at night and nobody ever bothered you. Things were much better than, I think, they'll ever be.

M: Do you recall any problems at the bridge during Prohibition days, when some people in El Paso wanted the bridge closed at certain hours because too many people were going to gamble over there?

R: Yes. There were many people who wanted the bridge closed by 11:00. I think they tried it for one or two nights, but it didn't work. Now, it seems to me that it was Pancho Villa that started this idea about passports, because we didn't have it on the American side. You could come over all the time and they wouldn't ask you any questions or anything. But Pancho Villa had some clerks on the Mexican side, and they had a little card. In order for you to go to Juárez--that meant Mexicans or Americans or Negroes or anybody--anybody that went to Juárez had to stop at this place and buy a card for identification. It would cost you 50¢. Now, I bought one of those. Well, as I understand, the reason that Pancho Villa did that was because a lot of the federales came over to El Paso, and he was afraid that they would infiltrate--go back in there. Of course, they did not fingerprint you; they only got your name and address and so forth, and they gave you this permit to go to Juárez. That was a money-making plan for Pancho Villa because he made plenty of money on those cards.

M: When was this? Do you recall the year?

R: No, I don't exactly recall the year, but it must have been somewhere around 1912, somewhere around there. About six months or a year later, the American side began to put into effect the passport business. And unless you showed that you were an American citizen...you had to show some sort of identification; and then the American side started this

business of passports. But we never had them here before. The fact is, you could go down there and come back; nobody bothered you over there in Juárez, [nobody] bothered you here. They didn't ask you, "What's your citizenship?" They didn't ask you, "What have you got with you?" No questions asked. You just came on over. In fact, I remember down there at the Santa Fe Bridge one evening I was coming along about 6:00 or 7:00. There was a man [there]; he was the only one at the bridge, on a soap box. Evidently he was sleeping; he had his head down. Anyway, I guess he heard me walking. He lifted up [his head] and looked at me, and then down it [went] again. They didn't bother about anything! [Laughter]

M: That was the check, huh?

R: Yeah.

M: During the Depression a lot of Mexican people were sent back to México as a result of the unemployment situation. Did you know any people who were expelled from the United States during this time?

R: No, I didn't. That was in 1929 and '30 and around there, and at that time I was transferred. I was working for the Hoover Company by that time and I was transferred from El Paso to Phoenix, Arizona, where I stayed for three years. I know that out of Phoenix many people left because there was no work there.

M: They went back to México from there?

R: They went back to México, yeah. I know that because at a little town called Glendale (that's west of Phoenix) some of the people that had been living there in the hope of finding work picking cotton--a lot of those homes were vacant; a lot of those houses were vacant there at Glendale. They were little cheap houses, you know, but just the same they were vacant.

M: When did you come back to El Paso?

R: In 1933 I believe it was--1933 or '34.

M: Did you stay with the same company?

R: Oh yes. I worked with the Hoover Company forty years; first here in El Paso, then in Phoenix, and then for a short while in Southern California, and then back to El Paso again.

M: What positions did you hold with the company?

R: District Manager. District Manager for West Texas, District Manager for Arizona and Assistant Division Manager in California.

M: By 1933 were you already District Manager?

R: Oh yes.

M: How many people did you have under you and how big was your territory?

R: Well, West Texas comprised all the way west of Pecos and in Arizona, the whole state of Arizona. In Arizona I had about 15 salesmen.

M: Were there any Mexican Americans among those 15?

R: Yes. There was only one American; all the others were Mexican Americans.

M: Were you the only District Manager in Arizona?

R: Yes.

M: Was it unusual to have so many Mexicans doing this?

R: Well, I happened to know two of them (and one of them was my relative), and they knew some more. I recruited most of the Mexican Americans.

M: Was there any resentment?

R: No. They all got along fine. I used to take them out for picnics. I've got some pictures there of some of them. There was only one I can recall whose name was Olson. Olson was one and...there were two, two American boys.

M: Would you say that in those times it was a little unusual for a Mexican American to have the kind of position that you had?

R: Yes. In fact, I was the only one, I believe, in the whole organization.

M: How do you account for your having reached that kind of position and many other Mexican Americans having much lower kinds of jobs? What set you apart from the rest?

R: I don't know. I'll tell you how I got started with the Hoover Company.

I was working with the El Paso Electric Company in the Trust Building on the corner of San Antonio and Stanton. The Electric Company only had two employees in the office--[another boy] and [myself]. He was a bookkeeper and I was a bookkeeper. In addition to office work I had to go to Juárez and read meters. Of course, we had about five outside men -- meter installers and also meter readers; but I used to do most of the meter reading in Juárez. This other gentleman and I ran the office. When I had to go out, he'd stay in; and when he had to go out, I had to stay in. But he stayed in most of the time. Eventually we expanded--we got another man and then we got two girls. And little by little, when the thing began to be too small, then we moved over to the present site of the Electric Company, there in the Martin Building. We moved over there and it began to expand. Jay (he's a lawyer now, then he was a little kid) was the first one that we employed there as an office boy. When they moved over to the new building, a man by the name of Lloyd Dolittle was Division Manager for the Hoover Company. Now, the Division Manager comprises maybe two or three states. But in Texas, being such a large state, Mr. Dolittle was the Division Manager. So he came up with his brother one day and he went to the Electric Company to sell them some Hoovers, to see if they would take the agency. He got to talking to me and [asked me] if I didn't want to be a salesman. In those days the salesmen would put a Hoover on their shoulder and go house to house and demonstrate it. So I was the

first one. Then again, Mr. Dolittle said, "Well, see if you can get somebody else." So when he came back the second time, I had another boy that was interested in it. Then I got another. Anyway, I had three boys that were selling Hoovers out of the Electric Company. Then Mr. Dolittle said, "Well, we have to have a Supervisor. We'll just name you Supervisor." So I was the Supervisor. Then about two years later when he came, he said, "Well, now we have to expand here. We have to get these little towns like Ft. Stockton and Pecos and those towns. We've got to name a District Manager for that to take over West Texas and El Paso. Would you like the job?" I said, "I don't know. I don't know anything." "We'll teach you." And sure enough, they sent me to the factory. They took me to their factory and at the factory they showed me all about making the machines. At that time, they didn't have these steam affairs. We made the molds on sand. We had boxes of sand; we put a mold in there and then poured the hot aluminum in there. That's the way they made the bases. And then they showed me all about the electrical parts. After that then they began to give me training about how to employ people, how to approach merchants, the whole business. When I came back, well, I was ready to go out; and I went out to several different towns and opened agencies.

M: Were most of your employees also Mexican American?

R: Well, here, no. Here I had about half and half.

M: It's highly unusual for a Mexican American to have achieved that kind of a position, especially given your background and your limited education. And yet, you were a Manager and you had a group of Anglo Americans under you. How did you get along with them, and how did they look at you as their boss?

R: Well, I never did notice that they showed any animosity or anything like

that because of [my] being a Mexican American. They all got along very nicely. When I'd get these boys together, both the Mexican Americans and the so-called white boys, they all seemed to get along fine. We'd go out to dinner or we'd go out to a picnic, and even with their wives. Now, among those, I had one boy [whose] name was Alfonso Zaragoza. He came here from México when he was recently married because he married a doctor's [daughter]. Of course, his folks were well-to-do; his father used to send him something like \$200, \$300 a month so that they could live here. But he was the type of boy that didn't like to be idle, so he went to work with me as a serviceman to start with; and he later on turned out to be one of the best salesmen I had. His father passed away--they had a big hardware store in Guaymas, México. Today he owns two supermarkets in Culiacán. We still communicate. He writes to me once in a while. He was a very good salesman. Then I had this boy, Blanco. He's in the customs business today. He was still going to school but he wanted something to do in the afternoons, so I hired him. He turned out to be a pretty good salesman. It seems that they all seemed to like the way that I handled them. I had tried to teach them to do things--how to act when they went into a home. In other words, I would say, "Leave your customers satisfied." Blanco turned out to be a good boy. This boy Frank Mena--he's in the real estate business today--was one of my good salesmen. I don't recall off-hand. I have their names in my files, but I don't recall the names right now. They all got along very nicely.

M: Your daughter describes you as a "go-getter."

R: Well, it's always been my way of doing things. First, I like everything in order. If I see something wrong, right now I want to go and correct it--anything that I see out of order, if it's within my means. I never did

like idleness when I was a youngster--I'd like to be doing something all of the time. Maurice Schwartz, one of the owners of the Popular, noticed it and he liked me very much. Other people have noticed it. But I just like to be doing something.

M: Do you consider yourself different from other Mexicans?

R: No, not a bit except that I have educated myself and made myself useful, whereas some of our people [have not] for some reason. Maybe it's lack of education or something, but heck, I never had much education, up until the third grade. Maybe it's the way the system is, or they're not as aggressive; they're afraid. But you will find that even in today's children. You'll find some children today are well educated but they're afraid to go across the street and sell a bar of soap. That's true.

M: And where did you get your aggressiveness? How did you overcome that fear?

R: To start with, my mother died when I was six months old. So, for a long time I lived with my grandmother. I didn't have very much to do. So I needed money, and there's not many ways to get it. I'd go out and help my aunt and collect eggs and sell the eggs at 10¢ a dozen and do errands; this, that and the other. And that's the way I made a little money. So, I started shining shoes. Then I started selling newspapers. Then I started working for an officer. He had an electric car and so I'd help him polish it up. That was in Brackettville. Then when I came to El Paso, then I began to work around the drug stores. But I felt that I had to be doing something all the time if I wanted to have any spending money.

M: There's a popular image among the Anglo American population that Mexicans are not as ambitious as Anglo Americans and Mexicans are lazy, that they don't want to get ahead as much as Anglo Americans want to get ahead.

What is your opinion about that?

R: Well, to some extent maybe some of them are, you know. But that's a lack of education. They've been suffering so much, in other words, that that has pulled them back. That's the way I look at it. I had never in my younger days, even as an orphan, worried about where I was going to get the next meal. I never worried about clothes or anything like that, because I knew that my grandmother would provide me. However, she didn't provide me money. Maybe that's the one reason ~~that~~ I'm a little aggressive, I don't know. Yes, I notice some people. It may be that they're afraid, not that they're not willing. They're more or less afraid to tackle something. They're afraid that if they don't do it right they'll be ashamed of themselves. That's the whole thing more than anything else--they're just afraid to go ahead and do something.

M: I want to ask you about your activities in LULAC. Could you tell me how you became active in LULAC and what you've done since you started?

R: When I first began, of course, I was just a member; but soon I was made Secretary. After I was made Secretary I began to help all the other officials. Then the national office men came here and they requested that I be their reporter or correspondent, and give them all the news of El Paso. And then when Mr. Jacques was voted in as the District Director, I was his right-hand man. I'd do all the work for him. Although I have been nominated several times for different positions, I never wanted to accept them because I felt that I could do more on the outside than with an official position. So I've helped everybody--the President, the National President, the District Director, the State Director--I helped them right along. But I, myself, didn't want to get the position.

M: Why did you feel that you could do more outside the organization?

R: Well, take for instance, the Vice-President. A Vice President is suppose to be the right hand man of the President; ~~therefore~~, because they're working, they can't attend to jobs. Well, by not having an office, I can go and ask them where they want some



printing done; Ok, I'll go and have it done for them. If they want some plan to make money for the Council in order that they have money with which to give scholarships or give to charity, well, I'd give them the plan. I'd sit down and take maybe half a day to effect out a plan, and I'd do that for the officers myself. That's what I mean; I could do more on the outside than having a position.

M: When you first became active in LULAC in the late 1930s, what were the issues here in the Mexican American community and how did LULAC get involved in those issues?

R: Well, the main issue at the time was the schools. What we were trying to [do] was get these people to give [students] a bilingual education. And that's where we started. There's a gentleman in Houston that did a very fine job with Malcolm MacGregor, the local lawyer here; he was the State Representative at that time. This man in Houston had a restaurant and he spent a lot of money. Here we were backing him up trying to get the state to put in a bilingual education [program]. They finally got something done. The first thing that was done was what they called "School 400"--to teach these youngsters, who didn't speak English at all, 400 words. And then later on, the state of Texas adopted that plan.

M: Who were the leaders in El Paso at that time in the Mexican American community?

R: Well, a man by the name of Machuca, Willy Flores, Modesto Gómez, [and] Frank Galván were among the leaders here.

M: Cleofas Calleros?

R: Well, Cleofas Calleros was not very much involved in LULAC, but he was with the Catholic Conference. Oh there's several. I can't recall all their names. Judge Rodríguez Sr. was one. He was involved in there.

- M: Who were the leaders outside of LULAC? Were there people involved in government at that time?
- R: I can't recall very well, but there were very few, very few. The first one that went to work for the government here was Willy Flores; he went to work at Beaumont. He was the first one that I know of. Then there are some that are now living in California that had been working in the shops here--the SP shops-- then they transferred to other business.
- M: Let me ask you a final question about the way LULAC has changed over the years since you first started becoming active with it. What has been the evolution of LULAC in El Paso over all these years?
- R: Well, in the beginning, what they were stressing [was] to be a good citizen. That's what [they were] stressing--be a good citizen. Do you happen to know the LULAC code?
- M: I may have read it somewhere.
- R: The idea is that you're a good American in every way and a person that's trustworthy (makes himself trustworthy). In fact, I think I have a copy there if you care to know the whole [code]. This LULAC code has not ever been changed or amended since it was first written at Corpus Christi in 1929 and it reads like this:

Respect your citizenship and preserve it; Honor your country, maintain its tradition in the Spirit of its citizens and embody yourself into its culture and civilization.

Be proud of your origin and maintain it immaculate, respect your glorious past and help to defend the rights of all the people.

Learn how to discharge your duties before you learn how to assert your rights, educate and make yourself worthy and stand high in the light of your deeds; you must always be loyal and courageous;

Filled with optimism, make yourself sociable, upright, judicious, and above all things be sober and collected in your habits, cautious in your actions, and sparing in your speech.

Believe in God, love Humanity and rely upon the framework of human progress, slow and sound, unequivocal and firm.

Always be honorable and highminded, learn how to be self-reliant upon your own qualifications and resources.

In war serve your country, in peace your convictions; discern, investigate, meditate and think, study, at all times be honest and generous.

Let your finest purpose be that of helping to see that each new generation shall be of a youth more efficient and capable and in this let your own children be included.

Now, that's a very nice code.

M: That's very good.

R: That's what we all try to follow. But what I like most is [that] there never has been any amendment to this. And again, they've been wanting LULAC to become involved in politics and all of that. Well, we don't think it's right any more than we think that the churches should be involved in politics. We do exercise our franchise, our rights. At election times we ask our members to be sure and go and [vote]; in other words, discharge your rights. In fact, I remember one time we put up a booth down by the Court House some 25 years ago. Every member had to go there and register [so that we would] know that they had been there. But we take no sides. That's the main thing--we take no sides. You vote for [the] man you want, and I vote for the man I want. That's the way LULAC has worked it. I think it's worked out good.

M: One last question. Could you give me your impression of the Chicano Movement? What do you think of what has been going on the last few years?

R: Well, they have accomplished something. The only thing I don't like is when they demonstrate and get out of order. I think that everything should be done according to law. When they become overly aggressive (I mean by that, they take and beat up somebody or they burn a place or something like that), I don't agree with that. I don't go for that. But being aggressive [is] all right in a peaceful way. Demonstrate and show your rights, that's OK. That's the way I feel about it.

M: Do you feel that they have accomplished necessary things?

R: Those that have demonstrated properly, yes. They have accomplished quite a bit, yes.

M: Well, Mr. Romo, I want to thank you very much for your time. I certainly have enjoyed this conversation with you. You have contributed toward our collection of historical materials at the University.

R: Well, you know at my age--85 years old--I can't immediately recall things, but go and see those other people I already gave you the names [of] and you'll get a lot of information of the olden days here and how our chicanos were. Again, I repeat that some people have said, and even Mr. Cleofas Calleros had told me, that the word "Chicano" originated in Spain. I still say that it originated here in El Paso, because when we lived down in the Second Ward, Santa Fe Street was the dividing line of Chihuahueta and us over here. They called us "pochitos" so we didn't know what to call them, so we finally invented that word because they were coming from Chihuahua. They were people from Chihuahua and they were mexicanos, so we called them "chicanos." I still say that word was coined here in El Paso, not California, not Spain.

M: Do you yourself have any objection to being called "Chicano," now?

R: Well, somewhat yes. I'd rather be called either an American or a Mexican American than a Chicano.

M: Do you see the word "Chicano" now, in 1975, having negative connotations?

R: Yes. I don't think it's proper. If you are an American citizen you are an American citizen. If you want [to talk about your] ancestors, well, Mexican or Mexican American, As a matter of fact, I would coin a new word--something like "United Statesan" or something like that. That would cover it all.

M: Well, thank you, sir.

R: OK. Well, I'm glad to help you out.