

3-9-1976

## Interview no. 237

Robert Miller

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Miller  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_  
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Manager of Woolworth Store in South El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Uniqueness of the Woolworth Store in South Stanton Street; day-to-day routines of the store; the impact on business brought about by the end of the streetcar line; merchants accusing Immigration Officers of Gestapo tactics; pilferage; illegal aliens.

1 hour, 26 pages.

Robert Miller  
by Oscar J. Martínez  
March 9, 1976

OM: This morning we are very happy to have a guest interviewee who has consented to give us a little of his time. His name is Robert Miller and he is Manager of the Woolworth Store on Stanton Street in South El Paso. He happens to be a neighbor of mine and we know each other very well, so I'll call him Bob, he can call me Oscar. Bob, when did you come to El Paso?

RM: In 1972, February.

OM: That's when you took over the store?

RM: Yes, I was promoted. At a former time I was living in San Francisco. I was an associate manager in our large store there and was given a promotion to come to this El Paso store.

OM: What were your thoughts on taking over this store on South Stanton Street, coming from a place like San Francisco to a place like El Paso?

RM: Well, excitement, challenge. The store in itself is a very unique store. The manager has the opportunity of merchandising the store more or less against policy because the store is not a staple Woolworth Store, as we know. Many of the items which we sell are unique to the area; their border trade is a different type of trade. The reason that I was selected for this store was that I had run our Mission Street store in San Francisco, which was a Latin-type store, but again it had the uniqueness of merchandising items for that particular area. We find that anyone that's able to merchandise one area should be able to merchandise another. The prior manager to me went to our Hawaii store in Waikiki Beach, and that again is a unique store in that it's a tourist-type store. It's a store where you have to buy items particularly for that store, and you can't go by any of the lists that are set up by the company. You have to formulate your own ideas and opinions and go from there. So the store is a big challenge. The first time I flew

over El Paso was in February of 1972, and coming from green, lush, San Francisco to brown El Paso is quite a shock! But we've grown to love the community and we like it here.

OM: You said your store is unique compared to other stores in other cities because of the line of merchandise that you carry. What is it that makes it so unique?

RM: Well, basically we're dealing with a low poverty people, as far as my store is particularly concerned. As you probably know, Stanton Street is the exit to Juárez, and the people traveling from El Paso go down the street on their way home. Many of these are the poverty level people and we have adapted the store to meet their needs. We have tried to merchandise the store to their level, what they could afford. Over the years, of course, the standard has improved and has gotten better each year. As an example, six years ago the store sold twenty-seven-cent thongs as a shoe, and this was our best seller in the shoe department. Everybody wore thongs. Now it has developed into tennis shoes, and we were able to pick up tennis shoes for .77 cents, .99 cents, that people could afford. The tennis shoe remained the staple shoe for a long time. Now we are into better shoes which anyone would wear, but we go after what we call seconds, or irregulars. In other words, what you would pay in Karl's Shoe Store for \$4.99 we try to get in our store for \$1.99 so that our people can afford them.

In selecting merchandise for the store, many times we gamble. There is a lot of distressed merchandise throughout the United States in different factories, and this distressed merchandise many times you can pick up at a real bargain price. Then we can take this and extend it to our customers. But it's like buying in the dark a lot. I make a lot of mistakes, as anyone

would, because it's a one-man operation as far as the merchandising is concerned. There isn't a big company behind you. I have my organization which helps a great deal, and we decide what items will sell. But it's funny, because you'll ask a girl if a certain item sold well in the past. "Oh, yeah, we used to sell a lot of this item. Buy it." You buy it and it'll be a completely dead item. So, it's constantly changing and you have to keep up with your current trends all the time.

OM: Do you have a technique for finding out from your customers what their tastes are and what they will and will not buy? On other words, do you do market research with your customers?

RM: Well, in a way. Management experience and the organization's experience comes into that factor. When we get calls for merchandise we have what we call a Call List of items that customers want. We take these call lists and go over them, and if the item appears a number of times then we try to secure those items that our customers want.

OM: I know that you carry a lot of food items, and that's different from other Woolworth Stores.

RM: Right. My best department, however, is candy. We have the second largest candy department in the Pacific region, which includes all of the western states including Wyoming and Colorado. Our candy department is unique in that we don't carry any bulk candies, it's all packaged goods; mostly bar goods. For instance, in one year we sold a million Hollywood candy bars, and that was two boxcar loads. So we are a unique store in that way.

OM: Why does candy sell so much?

RM: Well, México hasn't developed a good chocolate, and basically we are talking about chocolate candy bars. I believe that they come across to get

these items that they cannot secure in their own country. You're probably aware of the types of candy that are available in México and they haven't been able to market good chocolate in their own country.

OM: Is this store considered a good assignment within the Woolworth organization?

RM: Yes. It's a very challenging store and it's a step-off point for many promotions. The store is a "make-or-break" type operation. Like I say, it takes a merchandiser. Today in our operation we more or less want stock boys, somebody that'll sit down and be able to read a letter and follow out the policies in the operation. In this store you cannot do that, so you become a merchandiser of your own in the operation. You're kind of a black sheep in a way, but it is a challenge and it's a store that's always been highly sought after.

OM: How does that store compare with other stores in town, for example the store that used to be up in Coronado? What would be the differences between yours and that one?

RM: Well, our company is closing a lot of the small Woolworths stores. As you know we also operate Woolcos. In town, we had I believe seven Woolworth stores at one time. We are now down to two. We've closed five, but we've opened two Woolcos. It took approximately three Woolworth stores investment to operate one Woolco Store. So as we worry about our investment, we closed the small stores and tried to open the large ones. The country seemed to be moving towards the big store trend, the discount store trend, so this is why we have closed these other Woolworth stores in the past. But now these are staple stores, what we call a regular variety store. They're in small neighborhoods normally. They're nickle and dime stores, as I call them. When a lady wants a spool of thread, a package of needles, a piece

of yarn, she goes into the store. The average sale isn't high, but it's a convenience type operation where the customer can go in and find what they want. For instance, the Coronado Store, one of it's biggest departments was always sewing notions. Also for that neighborhood (all stores are merchandised for their own neighborhood) plants were always good in that particular area, because there's so much building going on and so many people putting their new homes and things in that area that we were always able to maintain good sales out of plants in that area. The K'Mart Store which opened across the street is in the same situation.

OM: How much business do you do a year in your store, in terms of dollars?

RM: We do \$1,300,000 in sales. Comparatively, I would say the average Woolworth store throughout the country would probably do somewhere around \$650,000. The average Woolco Store would do over \$4,000,000.

OM: That's quite an operation. And you are doing business primarily with poor people from Juárez?

RM: Correct, correct. I would say that 99 percent of my customers are Mexicans. If an Anglo walks into the store, he's either a salesman or someone peddling insurance or something. But you can usually spot them immediately. So it's a unique store from that angle.

OM: I understnad that maids comprise a significant portion of your customers. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

RM: The day-maid situation in El Paso, as I am sure the class has realized, many times maids would secure a border crossing card, a temporary pass, which is a visitor's pass into the United States. These passes, of course, were used so that they cold secure employment in El Paso working as maids, and they would work anywhere from \$5 to \$8 a day and work in many of the

homes in El Paso. These maids would come over in the morning and return in the evening around 4:00 in the afternoon. So the major part of our business would pick up at 4:00 o'clock. We'd be slow all day and at 4:00 o'clock our business would greatly increase; all these maids would come in. It was a funny situation. I'm sure [this is] the typical scene: the maids walking down the streets and at the bus stops they'd always have their shopping bags full of little goodies. They would come into the store and spend their day's earnings for groceries and things that they wanted back at home. Then they would get on the streetcar in front of the store and return home.

Now, this situation has been slowly, slowly deteriorating, and it's deteriorated [for] many reasons. The first thing that helped it was the loss of the streetcar, the loss of transportation. In August of 1973, I believe, they abandoned the streetcar, and at that time we went for almost three months without any border crossing transportation. The El Paso mayor retaliated by stopping all taxis, the little jitney buses which operated on the street; the police department got after them. So we went through a period where we had no transportation between the border for about three months. So what happened... I might go back into these customers. The low income people have been ripped off for many years by many people. They become very brand conscience\*; they became very loyal to the stores where they shop, where they knew that they could get good bargains, where they knew that they were not going to get ripped off. The loyalties remained and they formed shopping habits; and these shopping habits, of course, developed our business.

When the streetcar was abandoned, at the same time México put in a free

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\* conscious



duty on groceries. Now, always before, the groceries in Juárez had been much higher because of the duties that were put on them. /Mexicans/ came over and they bought a lot of American goods. These goods were then bought for the same price which I buy them for, but then they had a duty on them at the border. So when they got them into México, they had to sell them at a much higher price in order to make a profit. So, therefore, the customers would come to Stanton Street to buy the items /that they wanted/ because they knew that they could secure them at a better price. Well, this went on for years. Now in 1972 this free duty started and the list has grown each year since then. But, in 1972 itself, the customers had still formed their loyalties and habits. They hadn't found out that the Mexican grocery stores had the items at the same price because they had these shopping habits. I think it comes from being ripped off like I say; the loyalties are there, the shopping habits are there.

Well, this transportation has stopped. The old, "hop the streetcar for a dime and come to El Paso and do our shopping on Saturday" was no longer available to them, so they were forced to go into the Mexican markets. And there they found that they could buy the same items at the same price or cheaper. Well, they didn't have the inconvenience of having to come to El Paso to shop, so they formed new shopping habits. Now, the mayor has been after the streetcars; /but/ I don't think that the streetcars being placed back on Stanton Street is ever going to change their shopping habits back. I don't think it's going to be a big improvement in retail sales for the city of El Paso; it will be a tourist attraction only. That's my opinion. We now have the red buses working almost on the same route the streetcar worked. They're a little bit more expensive, but wages are higher today than

they were four years ago. So, I believe that the shopping habits have now been changed; the free duty on the goods in México has caused a change-over, and the people don't have to come to El Paso to shop anymore. They always came to El Paso for their groceries basically, and turned it into a kind of a fun day. It was like a carnival day every Saturday on Stanton Street. That's the candy, the popcorn. Popcorn sales on the street are fantastic. The little Newberry Store up from me is the largest popcorn sale store in the United States. He does approximately \$25,000 a year in popcorn. I do \$13,000 a year off a little popcorn machine, selling bag popcorn. It denotes kind of the carnival atmosphere that went on with their shopping trip. I can remember when I was a kid, we lived in El Centro, California, which is near the border, but we used to go to San Diego on shopping trips. Of course, El Centro was a very small city at the time. But I can remember as a kid wanting to go to San Diego to shop and walking into the five and dime and looking at the candy counter, and my eyes were big and bulging. This is the same type of situation we had with Juárez and El Paso.

OM: It's a big event for people down there to come over to here.

RM: Oh, I'm sure. And see all the merchandise, self-service stores, this type of thing made a big event and made a good time out of it. But México has now developed and more and more money is being poured into stores down there: Colosos Market, Super del Río and these stores have become self-service. They're taking on the same image that we have. And the reasons for coming to El Paso are not as many as they were.

OM: Are you saying that you've lost customers as a result of this free duty program?

RM: Oh, definitely. The grocery sales in my store /have/ dropped to a half of what I originally had.

OM: What about other stores on the same street? Is this a pattern?

RM: Yes, yes; all the groceries stores on the street have been hurt. Some of the stores are maintaining their business to a certain degree. There are two stores that I know of that are doing fairly well, but I've never really talked to the management of the stores to know whether or not /they've/ compared the figures prior to this problem. The Plaza Grocery and Silva's seem to have the majority of the grocery business on South Stanton.

OM: Can you tell us how much business has gone down? We just want to get an idea of how the situation has changed over the last couple of years with the transportation complications and then the Recession of '74-'75.

RM: The average number of customers per week is what has basically declined. We are running 6,000 less customers per week /than/ what we used to run our store. Now, the first year /of the recession/, 1974, we took an initial drop of 7 percent; that was the year after the problem. Now in 1973 we had the best year ever; we had had a fantastic eight months up until August. In August, after the streetcar /situation/, the business slowly deteriorated and December was the worst December we had ever had. So in 1973 we had a good year but we would have had a much better year had we not had the transportation problems. But the situation hit, and then in 1974 it just continued to drop and each month it seemed to escalate. So /1974/ was the worst year we had. The way that we have been able to compensate for the loss of customers is try to offer to them other merchandise and try to improve our average sale per customer, which is the way business is played. So our average sale per customer has improved and we have not lost as much as we could have done from this. Some stores have closed their doors and we've probably picked up some of the business that they had and /have/ been able to maintain

at the present level. Maybe I was smarter than the others, I don't know. But I've heard that stores have dropped anywhere from 10 to 30 percent.

OM: Let me ask you about the immediate impact that the streetcars had on sales on the store. What was the percentage drop in the month immediately following the stoppage of the streetcars--if you can remember a rough figure?

RM: In September, I believe we dropped 16 percent, which would be a drastic drop /in/ our type of operation. September is always our big sales month, "back to school." It's a contest month in the company with prizes to the management and the employees, so we work very hard during that month to maintain our sales. We did have a drastic drop that month. There are other things that relate to drops: There could be a loss of a business day during the month, /but/ I don't recall whether or not /that/ occurred during that particular month. There was a definite drop in September. In October the business seemed to come back a little, and in November the drop wasn't as bad. Then December was a crash to us. It wasn't 16 percent, but December, of course, is our biggest volume month in the variety store business--December meaning Christmas and toys and all this type of thing. So it's the biggest month we have. In a lot of stores the month of December alone is a fifth of the volume.

OM: Were the other stores along Stanton Street affected to the same degree?

RM: Yes, yes. In all the management that I talked to, they were all affected.

OM: Now the merchants down there were very upset about this situation taking place. What did the merchants do to try to bring back the streetcars, if anything?

RM: Well, actually I don't think the streetcars raised as much problem as the problems we had with the border guards. There we formed a group and went

and fought City Hall. As the streetcars were abandoned we each wrote letters to the mayor trying to help, but at that point it was diplomatic relations with the Juárez officials and there was nothing that we could do as a group. The merchants in Juárez saw the immediate rise in business and they immediately protested to their officials, and rightfully so. They started gaining in volume and gaining in sales and were getting some of this money that we were always getting. They didn't want the streetcar back on, so their officials, of course, were going the other way.

The thing that started off the streetcar business, I don't know if you recall but we had a partial labor strike, I believe, on the bridge. It used to cost people three cents to cross the bridge by car and a penny a person to cross if you were a pedestrian crossing the Santa Fe bridge. The toll takers on the Mexican side of the bridge had taken in, in dollars, during the year so many thousand dollars, and as I recall there was a \$30,000 loss between their salaries that City Lines was paying them and the amount that they took in in tolls. México would not let us raise the tolls, so El Paso City Lines fired all the employees and said, "Well, we don't need the tolls. We'll just fire all you people and forget it." Well, that raised the issue and then they hijacked one of the streetcars, or stopped it, and blocked the line, and from that point on we haven't had a streetcar since. Of course, there have been many negotiations with México. The officials in México lean towards their own Chamber of Commerce, who has been totally against putting the streetcar back on. But I believe at the present time if they put the streetcar back on it would be to their benefit. I don't believe that it's going to increase our retail trade to that great degree. It's going to increase the tourism between the two cities, though, and this is what they

want. They want the tourist business, and I think that would help Juárez more than it would us.

OM: Some people say that tourists don't use those streetcars.

RM: Well, I don't think they used to. However, I wanted to ride the streetcar. Of course, I came from San Francisco where we have the only cable car in the world that's still in operation. But El Paso streetcars were unique in that they were the only streetcars that went between /the/ boundaries of two countries, so they had a unique standpoint as far as tourism was concerned. I don't know if it was played up like it should be. The problem with the streetcars /was that/ they were not properly maintained and they were always dirty. I would like to see the streetcars put on, but do it much like in San Francisco cable cars run, as a tourist type operation with the conductors and things. Then you would probably find that it would benefit México more than it would the United States, but it would be something that would draw people. It's just what the El Paso Chamber of Commerce has been trying to do, draw conventions to the city of El Paso because of its closeness to the border. This is why we built the big Civic Center and Convention Hall, /to/ try to lure conventions into the city of El Paso, to bring more commerce into the city, which would also in turn help Juárez.

OM: Bob, you mentioned the problems that we had at the bridge in late 1974-early 1975. The merchants organized themselves as a group to try to correct the situation. Could you tell us about the activities that you were involved in and what you observed?

RM: Well, I can remember /the/ morning well. (Chuckles) We had no business in the store. I have two or three employees that live in Juárez. One of them came in and said, "They're stopping everybody at the bridge." I said,

"What do you mean they're stopping?" "They're searching everyone and they're checking all our passes. That's why /we were held/ up." They were late for work. Of course, with the lack of business in the store, I didn't know what was happening. What had happened was that the border guards on our side of the bridge--and this is United States Customs--had decided all at once that they were going to stop the maids from entering the United States. We were having economic pressures, with unemployment, in Washington. I can see it in my own mind, maybe my opinions are different from others; but in my own mind I remember George Meany was yelling that the illegal Mexicans were taking all the jobs and that we had to stop this trade. George Meany was screaming like hell in Washington and somebody had to do something. Well, they decided that they'd stop 8,000 maids in the city of El Paso and that was going to help the economic conditions in the United States. Nobody else would take those jobs.

One of the funny situations that developed /was/ that all the merchants organized themselves and we met with Chapman, who was the director /at/ that time, and we had a meeting which was attended by all the news media. He proceeded to tell us that no longer would the illegal alien be our customer and that the illegal maid, the maids that were crossing using a temporary border crossing pass, would not be able to be employed in the city of El Paso. So then on a third or fourth statement that he made, he started talking about the illegal alien situation, and he says, "We know that in the County of Los Angeles there are two million illegal aliens." My point was raised at the time, I said, "You mean you've got two million illegal aliens in the County of Los Angeles, California, and you're worried about 8,000 maids crossing over into El Paso?" And of course, he didn't have any comment

to make about that. But this is the situation that developed. /He was/ from Washington and he would never say anything other than it was policy. This was his comment, "This is policy." /He/ would not ever say that he was receiving pressure from Washington, D.C.; but in my mind, I see all this razz in Washington going on. They had to go back to George Meany and say, "We've done something. We've stopped all these people from coming over to El Paso to work, and so we've provided all these jobs."

The State of Texas Employment Agency had a campaign last year which tickled me quite a bit. They were picking up the illegal aliens working on construction sites and turning these jobs over to the State of Texas. You probably recall reading in the paper where they picked up 40 illegal aliens working in the city of El Paso, and all these jobs could be taken by American citizens. The situation is funny in a way. Who in the United States is going to work as a day maid for \$5 to \$8 a day? And if you go to \$20 a day, who can afford you? These people were gaining employment which they could not gain in their own country. Most of the money, uniquely enough, was spent in the United States before they left the country. I can remember many times that a customer would count out the pennies in her hand, and she'd lay a dime /aside/ to get on the streetcar with, and she'd spend the rest of the money that was in her hand and she'd go back to México broke. They'd buy candy or what they wanted with the remaining change, and always had the dime to get back on the streetcar, or the 20 cents maybe, /to have a dime/ to come back in the morning.

That certainly hasn't helped the economic conditions of the United States, in my opinion. It has hurt a lot of people in México because these people had no other ways to get jobs. They're uneducated, they're women that spend



all their lives being mothers and being housekeepers. That's all they know. People in El Paso were able to utilize this. This is not only unique to El Paso, I'm sure it's unique to every border area. I remember in El Centro we had the same situation, which we were 11 miles from Mexicali. There were a lot of maids working then. I remember /my/ years as a child /living/ through the Bracero Program and going over to /a/ friend's house. They would have an illegal maid and the border patrol would come and pick them up and the next day they'd be back. It's been off and on for years that way. I don't think it has that much economic effect on the United States as a whole.

OM: I remember the merchants accusing the Immigration officers of Gestapo tactics at the bridge. Were you present at that meeting?

RM: Oh, yeah. We went down and observed at one point to see what was happening at the bridge. What they did to these poor maids was /that/ they would get a card and they would take them into /a/ room and search them, /they'd ask what they were/ going to El Paso for. They would always say that they were going to El Paso to shop. Then they'd search their wallet to see how much money they had, and they would not have enough money on them. We felt they were using Gestapo tactics in the way that they searched these people and questioned them and they would get down names, and addresses, and copy them down from their purses. They were actually searching these people and then interrogating them until they confessed. Then they would tear the card up in front of them and turn them back loose to go back across the border. It was again a humorous situation from the standpoint that these people thought they had all this power. I don't believe it was right. They denied everything. Every time you would accuse anyone, /they'd say/, "Well, that wasn't us, that

was /the other department/." There's Customs and there's Immigration, /and each department accused the other/. It was a seesaw battle back and forth of denial of what was actually going on. Someone went over to the bridge and they were going to take pictures of this going on. They raised their camera and one of the Immigration officers ran over and stopped him and said, "We are going to take that camera away from you. You can't take pictures here, this is a government installation." It was a situation /in which/ they were fighting and we were fighting. We were trying to only say that these people that were coming across were spending their money in El Paso. Whether or not they worked here, it didn't matter to us.

But what happened, when you start having troubles at the border, the other people become suspicious and they also become afraid to cross the border. So it stopped a lot of the other people coming across also, just the confusion at the border itself. People were afraid to cross. Rumor spread, as I am sure they would, throughout the city of Juárez, "They're taking all the cards away! Don't cross the border!" So it stopped all traffic practically for a few days.

OM: How did the merchants on the other side react?

RM: I don't recall them doing too much or saying much about the situation. To be honest with you, I don't recall what their emotions were. They have always, of course, tried to keep more of the business in México. Many of the duty laws in México have been designed so that they could keep the business in México, which is their opportunity, their choice. It would probably be ours also. For instance, they're not supposed to take toys back into México, they're supposed to buy Mexican toys. Well, the mordida at the bridge, the border guards in México have always been able to accept a small

bribe. "I have a doll." "Okay, give me a dollar and you can take it into México." So the mordida at the bridge has played a big role and we've always had smuggling of items that were restricted or /that/ shouldn't have been taken into the country. I think we've always had the ability to take anything we wanted into México, but we had to pay a little to get it in there.

The Mexican merchants, I think, probably just sat back and laughed at the situation and thought, "The United States is cutting their own throat. El Paso is cutting their own throat." Of course, it wasn't El Paso officials, it came from the United States government down in Washington. But they probably laughed at the situation, just thinking, "Gee, we get all these customers." But if they don't come over and make money, they wouldn't have any customers. It's a situation that's unique in itself.

OM: Bob, have you had any problems with juveniles from Juárez in your store?

RM: Oh, yeah. We've always had illegal alien problems from the kids that come across: stealing, pilfering, breaking in the store at night. Regretfully there is nothing that you can do that will ever totally alleviate the problem unless you put up an electrified fence for 80 miles around the border and have guard dogs watching so that nobody could get across. The situation is that, as far as the United States is concerned, these kids come over and pilfer but we don't have the money to do anything about it. We don't want to put them in orphanages. México is the same way: they don't have any money to support these children. You know what the costs are to imprison somebody--have to feed him everyday and have guards and care-takers there; laundry, etcetera. So it costs money anytime you imprison anyone. So these kids that come over, the basic policy was always to take them back to the bridge. I have on occasion caught the same kid two or three times a day in

my store--illegal. He would be hauled back to the bridge, get his ride in the police car and come running back across and try to steal some more. Some of these kids are really pros. We've caught eight-year-old kids with /a/ hundred dollars worth of merchandise. The situation is tough in that respect. We not only have a juvenile problem, we have an illegal alien problem from pros that are trained purse snatchers /and/ pick-pockets, this type of thing. /They/ thrive and /have/ always thrived in the crowds on Stanton Street. I've stopped several pick-pockets myself; you begin to know them by sight. But what really ticks you off is that nothing is done about it; nothing. I've caught kids with their hands right in the lady's purses and the lady wouldn't even stop to give me her name or to say anything against the kid, you know; they'll just run off, she doesn't want to get involved. There are very few people that want to get involved in criminal justice today and want to make a complaint and want to do anything about the problems. So, the problem is going to exist and I don't know what the answers are; I certainly hope that somewhere we'll find a way that we can take care of these kids and get them off the streets. Many of them are ragamuffins. They have no place to live, they live in the streets of Juárez; they don't have homes. If they get thrown in the juvenile hall over there, they're beaten and tortured and whatever.

I interviewed two 18 year olds that had been caught burglarizing a house, a residence. The police interviewed them and they rolled up their sleeves and these kids just had massive scars on their hands and arms. The police officer asked him, "Why all these scars? What's this?" He explained to me that when these kids get thrown in juvenile hall--they're not fed or whatever--/they/ will cut themselves to a degree that they will get /transferred/ over to

a hospital, and from there they can escape. I don't know what the situation is, but I've seen the scars on many kids that I've stopped since, where they have just huge scars on their forearms and legs where they've cut themselves badly with a broken piece of glass. That's the only incidence where I've heard an explanation of what it's from, but /it/ certainly seems to me like somebody could do something about these kids and help them. If they start off stealing, they're going to continue to steal and it's going to get worse. It's just not a good healthy situation as far as the city is concerned.

OM: Let me ask you your opinion about the new shopping center that is going up in Juárez, on the eastern side of town near the PRONAF area. When I drive over there I always am interested to see how it's progressing. How do you think that shopping center will affect business in El Paso, especially the competition that it will provide for places like Cielo Vista Mall or Morningside Mall?

RM: Well, the shopping centers in El Paso basically do not thrive on Mexican trade. There is a lot of Mexican trade that comes up from the lower provinces where you have people that have a lot of money, that are able to journey to the border to shop. These people go to the shopping centers; this isn't the border crossing people at Stanton Street. We don't get much of this trade. There are some of the merchants on Stanton Street, such as the Border Tobacco Company which deals in electronics basically and some candy (they deal basically in wholesale business) /who/ deal with these people; but they're buying at wholesale to take it to México to resell. I don't think the shopping center would affect that wholesale trade. It might affect the shopping center trade. However, I haven't seen the shopping center; I don't know what it is. I would think that it would be more of an outlet for the people of Juárez

themselves. The people that journey from the lower provinces in México will probably still cross over to our shopping centers, unless they really give them something unique and different. They come to the United States to shop basically because we have different merchandise--different clothing and apparel. They come here to buy the style merchandise. Now, if that merchandise is offered in México, there is no more reason for them to cross. But the rich in México have always had the ability to get the cars to come to the United States; it's the poor people that basically my trade has been with. If those shopping centers appeal to whatever trade they take, it's going to hurt somebody; but I don't know exactly who it's going to hurt, because they're going to have to appeal to one people or another. There's so many different markets that we have. I would say that basically it will probably be for the city of Juárez themselves, the people. As you know, there is much housing in that area and they would probably shop that shopping center, just as Cielo Vista Mall and Bassett Center here. The people in the neighborhoods shop them, and I would think that it would be the same in México. I don't think it will have any more effect than that.

OM: Bob, from your acquaintance with Stanton Street merchants, who owns most of the businesses down there?

RM: Well, basically, as far as the land, it is owned by Arabs and Jews. (Chuckles) I think that's probably unique, because that's true of every border city I know. I know Calexico is the same; Nogales is the same; Laredo. Close to the border area, a great majority of business are owned by Jewish people. But if you'll remember when we started this open trade with México back in the '50s, we had a lot of displaced Jews that had come over after World War II. Jews in themselves are a unique people; they want to work for

themselves. They're gamblers. They don't want to work for someone else, they want to work for themselves; and they've always been known to be merchants. They caught on to the border trade immediately; they moved into the border areas. And when one makes a success, he tells his friends and they all follow. So it becomes throughout all border cities in the United States that the Jews moved in and tried to buy the property. I don't have to tell you how much money they've made. They're millionnaires, all of them, that have been able to buy property along the border and along Stanton Street and operate their businesses there. Two particular gentlemen that I know down on the street, both are millionnaires today. One owns several loan companies, the other owns a furniture company and a lot of land, a couple of apartments. But they landed in El Paso with \$48 between them in their pockets.

OM: When was this?

RM: In 1948. They landed in El Paso with \$48 in their pocket. And they started selling door to door and were able to build their money up and were able to buy land, speculate. I guess they must be great speculators, but that's unique to their race. They're gamblers and they're not afraid to loose everything they have and start all over, as many of us are. We get into security jobs such as manager of Woolworth Company, where we have the security; we're reluctant to step out on our own and build our own business, because we're afraid of disaster, we're afraid of losing everything we have. They, on the other hand, don't want to work for someobdy, they want to work for themselves, they gamble, and they'll go out and they're not afraid to loose everything, because they didn't have anything to start with. Most of them had lost everything during the war, and the two /in/ particular that

I'm talking about came from Germany--they're both German Jews--as there were many displaced Germans Jews throughout the United States that flocked here after World War II.

OM: Have you noticed any resentment on the part of the Mexican people in that area, because of these outsiders who come in and take over businesses that way?

RM: Well, I've only been here four years, I haven't seen the complete trend. The low income people in México have always had patrones, jefes, that ran everything. I'm sure there must be some resentment. This situation with shoplifting for example; I'm sure they think that they're stealing from the rich for themselves and they have nothing. They can justify many times their own stealing. I'm sure if they took a lie detector test that they would pass it if they could justify this. I talked to the lie detector man about that and he said that if you could justify stealing in your mind, you could actually pass the test. They have trouble on the Indian reservations with taking lie detector test because the Indians can justify that everything was stolen from them. They can pass this test /by saying/ that they're stealing only what is theirs.

I'm sure there must be some resentment there. We have in the past had a Mexican American running the store and he had resentment because he happened to be Protestant rather than Catholic. I remember him telling me this; at the time we were talking about these resentments or prejudices that would incur because I was the manager of the store. When I took over the store I was the only Anglo in the store, as all my employees were Mexican American. So he felt that there would be some prejudice there and vice-versa, and I'm sure there is. But he said, "Also I had prejudice, because at one time I



was accused of having all Protestants for supervisors and all the Catholics had the lower jobs." So no matter what situation we get into, there's going to be prejudices, there's going to be reasons, or justifiable means, that we try to justify why we haven't made it; we've got to make these excuses to ourselves. So the resentments and anxieties are always going to be with us, no matter what we do. That's true of any people, whether it be the Mexican/Anglo relationship or black/Anglo relationship or the black/black relationship. It's a situation that's going to be there because somebody's going to be successful and somebody isn't.

OM: Let me ask you a couple of final questions Bob, and then we can open it up for discussion. Are you happy with the store?

RM: Well, the store has been a great challenge to me. I've enjoyed the operation, I've learned a lot. One of the things about the store I didn't mention earlier was that each year I get to go on a buying trip to New York. So I've been here to go to New York and visit there with manufacturers, go out on the town, be entertained, see Broadway shows and all these things. So this is unique to maybe four or five stores in our whole region out of 500 stores. That's the standpoint of running the store. Like I say, It has a high prestige. It's a tough store to run. You make a lot of mistakes. The pilferage has hurt me badly in the store, controlling the shrinkage. Shrinkage is what we call lost profits. Our shrinkages have been high, they always have been in the store. A lot of pilferage goes on. The problems that have arisen from the shrinkages have disturbed me a great deal. The first thing that happens when a store has a big shrinkage is that management thinks that the employees are ripping 'em off, so there becomes a lot of pressure placed upon me and upon my help. Outside pilferage is probably

80 percent; we have some internal pilferage, every business does. When I first moved in to the store we had some internal pilferage. At the present time I don't think we have very much if we have any at all; I think we've controlled it. It's establishing policies and making the people understand what those policies are for, and making them work, and being fair and apply that fairness to everybody. That makes a store a pleasure to work in, when everybody understands and knows and they don't try to beat the system.

But the pressures come from up above. Whenever you have a shrinkage management says, "Somebody is ripping you off." You stand there and they're accusing you, they're accusing your employees, they're accusing everyone. So that's the difficult part about running a store. I don't believe that there's as much internal pilferage as much as there is external pilferage. We have people from poverty levels, they steal many times of necessity. They have 50 cents in their pocket and they need some dinner and they'll come to the grocery section and steal baby food to take home--milk, lard, these type of things; things that you and I wouldn't steal. Then also they'll buy necessities with all the money they have and steal the things that they want. We have pilferages from all walks of life, but what's dramatic about my store is that, of course, in any variety store, women comprise the majority of our business. But you find that middle-age mothers seem to be our biggest shoplifters. They don't steal a lot, but every time they're in the store they steal a little. Like I say, I think many times it's because of necessity; they're to that level that they really can't buy or they aren't able to cope with their desire, their wants. They want to have what we have and so they come in and try to steal a scarf or whatever.

OM: A final question. Have you had enough of business in South El Paso? Are

you ready to move to another city?

RM: Well, I was relieved yesterday of the job. I recently underwent back surgery and I'm on a leave of absence at the present time. We had a substantial shrinkage this year. The company wasn't happy from that standpoint with the loss of the money and so my job, I felt, was in jeopardy from the start. They feel that possibly it's because I'm an Anglo. When we look at these stores, we've tried to place Mexican American managers within them. They feel there won't be these prejudices that we talked about, there won't be excuses. I don't know if it's going to make a difference or not. They happened to replace me with a man that I came up with, José Jiménez. He's from El Cajón, California, and he and I were assistants about the same time and we were store managers together. Joe and I are well acquainted with one another. He got a great promotion out of the deal; he came from a smaller store. Certainly his name had a great deal to do with it, but again they looked at the shrinkage and they thought, "Well, maybe it is internal pilferage. Maybe somebody that can communicate better with the people will be able to control the store better." So they've placed him as manager of the store.

So I don't know where I'm going; at the present time I'm on a medical leave of absence and I'm sitting in limbo. I hope to stay in El Paso. I would like to stay in the store. The store at the present time probably has the best organization since I've been in the store, and it's enjoyable to work there because it has the support of all the employees, and I enjoy working there. I wouldn't say that was always so, because many times I had employees fighting against me, we had factions. Through the years most of those people that didn't like me have left. So now it's down to the point

where I have the supporters behind me and I have a strong team that wants to support me. I looked forward to probably having my best year in the store and I'm a little sad to go because of that. I felt this would be a good year. But I have been replaced and now whether or not I'd like to go, I'm already going. So I can't really answer your question. (Laughs) I'd like to stay in El Paso.

OM: Well, thanks very much Bob.