

3-18-1976

Interview no. 218

Juan Hernandez

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



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

Recommended Citation

Interview with Juan Hernandez by Roberto Carrillo, 1976, "Interview no. 218," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Juan Hernandez (1954-)
INTERVIEWER: Roberto Carrillo
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 18, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 218
TRANSCRIBER: Romelia Martinez
DATE TRANSCRIBED: April 26, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:
Student at UTEP.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; life in the Segundo Barrio (South El Paso); the Chicano Movement; comparison of life in the barrio with his present living conditions.

[This is an interview with Juan Hernandez conducted for the Oral History Institute at UTEP by Roberto Carrillo. Class project for History 3390, The U.S.-México Border Since 1848, at U.T. El Paso. Hernandez is currently attending UTEP under the V.A. program.]

C: Juan, you want to tell us something about your life, where you were born, what type of education you hold, where you live, and things like that? Por favor, Juan.

H: Oh, I was born here in El Paso on September 12, 1954. I graduated from Bowie High School; I have been educated in the schools of the segundo barrio; and I'm presently attending UTEP. I am trying to major in psychology, but my counselor advised me to major in business. So right now I don't know what my major is [going to be]. So that's about it.

C: You said that you were from Ciudad Juárez.

H: No! I am from El Paso. Originally, I was born in Ysleta, but I was raised in El Paso.

C: Ok, Juan, can you tell us where your family is originally from?

H: My mother's family is originally from Arizona. My grandparents moved from México. They were land owners there, but during the time of the Revolution and the Depression, they moved to Arizona. They went to look for jobs in the mines in Arizona (around Superior, Arizona, there were copper mines), but they moved back to México when my mother was about three years old and they went back to their land, which they got back after the Revolution, I guess. Both of my parents grew up in a little town called Michacanego, Jalisco; it's a couple of miles out of Aguascalientes. They came to Ciudad Juárez in the '50s and lived there for about five or six years. I was conceived in Juárez, but during the eighth month my mother moved to El Paso, so I was born here. Two of my other sisters were born in Juárez, but they became naturalized

citizens. (I don't think that matters, but...)

C: Juan, you said that your family moved over here to the United States during the Mexican Revolution?

H: Just my mother's family.

C: Ok, just your mother's parents. Have you heard any interesting stories pertaining to the Revolution? En otras palabras, ¿no te han contado tus abuelos cuentos de la Revolución, por qué se vinieron para acá?

H: Well, no, my parents were not involved in the Revolution. My grandfather, my mother's father, was a teacher in México before the Revolution. He was a very well noted scholar or something near Aguascalientes; he went to the university over there, and he married. He was a very devoted teacher for the rurales, for the rural people. And during the Revolution when the rurales, or say the peasants, got their uprising, he was kind of persecuted, I guess, so he came here to the United States to work in the mines. He had a lot of land over there. I guess it was confiscated, taken over, by the rurales during that time; but when the Revolution was over, he went back to his land.

C: After the end of the Revolution, he went back to México?

H: Right.

C: Did he assume the position that he had prior to the Revolution?

R: Yes, he assumed his position. He acquired some land from people that were grateful to him, because at that time, nobody had much money; the only thing [they had] was land and the crops they used to gather. That's the way people got paid. They've got a lot of land, I guess.

C: Juan, now I'd like to go back, if I may, to your early childhood in the

segundo barrio, where you have lived in the segundo barrio and things like this. Will you tell us some interesting early experience that you have encountered?

H: Well, for 12 years, I lived in the segundo barrio a street away from Roosevelt Elementary School. I attended Roosevelt for five years. At Roosevelt, one of the incidents that I now remember was kind of dumb. I was in second grade, and we were studying American History or something. One time Miss Caballero, my second grade teacher, told us the story of the Alamo. She said that Jim Bowie, Davie Crockett, and all those guys held off 1,000 Mexicans that were storming the Alamo. Everybody in the class applauded, except me. I kept wondering, aren't we Mexicans? Why are we applauding some "gringos" [that] defeated some Mexicans? They made it a big story. I don't think it's true, but that's the way history is, I guess.

C: ¿No te han contado también tus abuelos cuentos a base de estas guerras del Alamo or Mexican War?

H: No, it was before their time.

C: So you haven't heard anything about it?

H: No. My father is very liberal and he always complains about the imperialism of the United States towards México, the time when the United States or the big companies in the United States went over to México and exploited some of the resources that México had (especially around the oil fields before PEMEX took over.)

C: In other words, you haven't heard any Mexican interpretation of the Mexican-American War?

- H: No. Mostly [I've heard] about Pancho Villa. What I read in American textbooks is that Pancho Villa was a bandit, thief, cutthroat--all that shit--but my dad thinks that Pancho Villa was a hero. So I don't know which to believe, my father or the American textbooks.
- C: Ok. Could you tell us some of the most interesting experiences that you have lived through, either discriminatory or humorous?
- H: Well, the worst discriminatory act [that I have experienced] was when I was working part-time at Beaumont as a janitor. I was working in this building which I had access to--I had the key and everything. I was working inside the building--it was a two story building--and I was working in the basement. I heard some footsteps upstairs, so I said, "There must be somebody up there." So I went up and there was this MP, "white" MP, from Beaumont. He took out his gun, pointed it at me and he said, "What are you doing here?" and all that, and "Mexican" and all that shit. And I got uptight and told him, "Here's my tag, I work here for the Housekeeping Branch." And he said, "But you don't look like a janitor to me, you look more like a thief or something like that," and we got into an argument. So he finally had to call janitorial headquarters, the Housekeeping Branch, I guess.
- C: And all because you looked like a Mexican?
- H: Yeah. I guess because I looked like a "greaser."
- C: That's interesting. You have any other experiences or anything else to say pertaining to discrimination?
- H: Well, yeah. I have Dr. Leonard for Political Science and he has several discussion groups. The funny thing about it is that he asks most of his

questions to Anglos in his discussion group (he knows most of them.) He only has one Mexican, which is me. And every time I direct a question toward him, he doesn't look at me. He looks up off at another place or something.

C: Does he answer your questions?

H: Yeah, he answers my questions, but he acts kind of impersonal, like if he was talking to a tape recorder, I guess.

C: That's interesting. Bueno, ahora nomás quiero preguntarte preguntas generales de tu vida, de tu juventud en "el segundo". Quiero que nos lledes a tus años "del segundo" y que te sientas libre de hablar. Talk to us about your experiences in Second Ward. What did life mean to you in Second Ward?

H: Well, the only way I can explain my life in Second Ward is by contrasting it to my life right now as a UTEP student, since this school is mostly Anglo. I'd like to contrast with that. In the segundo barrio, [most] of us used to be Mexicans, except a couple--two or three blacks or one white or something. Most of us were Mexicans and we used to hang around in the street corners and everything, not because we were juvenile delinquents, but because we [didn't] want to stay home; because at home there wasn't much to do. So we used to hang around the corners, but not to make delinquent acts. We used to try to make fun by slamming on doors at night and running away. [We] used to get into little gang fights, no knives, clubs or anything like that. We just got together and tried to get the guys and put them in a mud pile or puddle or something. It was a lot of fun in the Second Ward 'cause we didn't have any

obligations to have money, buy cars [or] buy nice clothes, because everybody used to dress shabby. We didn't have much. The money we got was [from] selling papers, [and we'd use it] just for buying hamburgers. We weren't interested too much in money; we were more interested in relations with our friend, how we got along. And now that I moved into the upper-middle class, I see that everybody around me is interested in money. I lived next door to some whites, and they were always interested in money, you know. They always had something going on to improve their house--putting in \$30 or \$40 antennas for their color tv's; they had around four or five cars, and things like that. I don't think it's good for them, but...[It's] not my life style, I guess.

C: You said that when you lived in Second Ward, they were not interested in material wealth or big cars [or] fine clothes. In other words, they were just interested in a simple life?

H: Yeah, the simple life; and having friends that were not relatives, but the next closest thing to a relative. I could talk more to my friends than to my cousins from California that used to visit us once in a while. So it was a very good relationship down there in Second Ward.

C: What type of housing did you have?

H: We used to have a three room apartment with the toilets outside, and about 50 people shared the toilets out there. When we were small, I remember I used to sleep with my sister because we only had three beds: one for my parents, one for my three sisters, and one for me and my little sister. We used to sleep in the kitchen right next to the sink, and it used to drip all the time.

C: Can you remember the amount of rent your parents paid?

H: I think it was about \$30 per month.

C: In the "segundo," did you live in the same place all your life or did you live in other parts?

H: I lived in three places, but now most of them are torn down. The city condemned them. Every time I go to Second Ward, I remember the places I used to live, and I wonder why they threw them down. Well, I know why they threw them down.

C: Were they in bad condition?

H: Oh, yeah, they were in bad conditions. The walls had big cracks on them. One of the houses I used to live in had burned down once before. [But] it was a nice place to live in, we had the restroom inside the house; it made a big difference.

C: Let's talk about your education at Bowie or the type of education you received at Bowie. Do you think it was adequate?

H: No. I don't believe the education at Bowie was adequate. Bowie is more like a fun school. It's geared for fun or something; I don't know, but their education is not very good. The teachers try not to give the students hard questions or whatever. I remember when I took a quiz I wouldn't have to study. For a test, I would just go there and I would get an "A." It was geared for the low down class, I guess.

C: When you were in Bowie were you called a "dumb Mexican" or a "typical Mexican?"

H: No. I was never called that by a teacher. I think the Anglo teachers that worked at Bowie respected you as a person because there are a lot

of Mexicans there and they can't discriminate. They are a part of the environment.

C: You said that you moved out of Second Ward. Where do you live right now?

H: I live down by the lower valley, near Yarbrough and Carolina, right off the freeway.

C: This neighborhood, is it mainly Chicano or is it well integrated?

H: Yeah, it's mostly Chicano. But there are some white families, mostly "red neck" families [where] the father works for some kind of service company like the telephone company or the gas company; mostly whites that came from other parts of Texas.

C: Going back to when the city started to condemn the houses in the "segundo," what was your attitude toward this?

H: Well, I remember the people saying, "We want better housing." I used to go to the marches in the tenth grade; I was kind of active in the movement. I remember when the people were asking for better housing, and for restrooms inside every apartment, things like that. And when they started building housing projects everybody was happy. But all of a sudden they were making housing projects all the way down to the lower valley, near a cemetery down by Ysleta, and some others near the Country Club and Coronado. People weren't too happy to leave the "barrio" and go up there. Like me, I had to move from the "segundo" over to where I live. It was a big difference, because over where I live most of the Chicanos talk English, and they are money oriented. I had a lot of problems adjusting to the new environment, because there

are so many people interested in money that it's ridiculous. Nobody wants to make a relationship, a personal relationship. They just want to see how much they could get out of you or how it is to their advantage to be a friend.

C: Do you think the city or the city government is responsible [for] providing better housing for the poor?

H: Yes, of course, it is! We pay taxes. I have been working since high school, and I get a lot of tax taken away from me. Everytime I go to a store, I have to pay taxes and everything. If I am going to pay taxes, I think that part of my money should go to the poor people. Like myself, I used to be poor, so I know I don't mind people taxing me. But I [do] mind it when they [use] my tax money [for] stupid things like building a highway. We are not going to use it for a long time, [not] after the gasoline runs out.

C: When you moved out of Second Ward and your house was condemned, did you have any ill attitude toward the city government or toward the ecology system?

C: No. When I barely moved out of the segundo barrio into the new housing tenements, I was happy. It was a new experience. I thought, well, we might live better over here; so I was very happy. But after a couple of months, I realized it was not as ideal as it was supposed to be. We lived better, but there weren't many relations we could establish over there, because everybody or mostly everybody was interested in money.

C: I don't know if I should bring in the Chicanismo or not. What do you

call yourself, a Chicano or Mexican American?

H: I consider myself a Chicano, because true Mexican American implies that I am a Mexican and an American at the same time. But a Chicano is a Chicano; the Chicano society is a particular group of its own. It's not Mexican, it's not American. It's just a particular culture that's developed, especially around Texas--what we call "Tex-Mex." I would consider myself "Tex-Mex," [but] not a Mexican American.

C: What role did the Chicano Movement play in the Urban Renewal and in getting better housing for the poor?

H: Well, it played a very important role, because we got into marches, we had tent cities, and had people marching. I remember MAYA and MECHA and all those organizations going down and storming into the Mayor's City Council. We used to have a lot of movement. It had a very important role in Urban Renewal.

C: Were you a part of any Chicano group?

H: No, I was not part of the Chicano group. I'm mostly interested in helping people through laws and education and things like that. I am not that interested in going out and causing violence or things like that, fighting with "pigs." I leave that to people that like to fight, that like to get guns.

C: Do you consider yourself a part of the movimiento?

H: Yes, I consider myself part of the movimiento, but the underneath part. Bajo de ala, you know, bajo de la ala, like LULAC.

C: So you're for LULAC?

H: I'm for LULAC.

C: You're not a part of the radical movimiento, you're not [part of] a

militant movimiento?

H: No.

C: Is there such a thing as the militant radical movimiento?

H: Hell, yeah! For example, the Brown Berets. I remember back in '67 the Brown Berets came down to El Paso from California and Colorado. It looked like John Wayne, it looked like the Green Berets that used to go to Vietnam.

* * * * PAUSE * * * *

C: Juan, we were talking [about] the militant part of the movimiento, the Brown Berets. Could you talk any more about it or do you have any further comments?

H: The Movement got to its peak during the early '70s, around '70, '71. It started in '69 when people started marching and various community leaders started getting involved in it for the Chicanos. One of them was sociology professor, Felipe Perleta; he was involved with MAYA and Bravo and MACHO's. I was part of MACHO's for a while, but I didn't like it that much because we used to go and do some marching, but it was not too involved. But I remember when the Brown Berets came from California and Colorado, they looked militant, let me tell you. They had berets, they had khaki uniforms with pistol belts, canteen, storm trooper boots, and all that. They looked kind of militant to me, like Ché Guevara.

C: Did they resemble Mexican revolucionarios?

H: Not really. They resembled Castro's revolutionaries more, or like Ché Guevara, with berets and all that. A Mexican revolutionary used to

wear guaraches, and calzones blancos (what they called white pants, real thin white pants).

C: You say you're not part of any Chicano group right now, but you do consider yourself part of the movimiento?

H: Yes. I consider myself part of the movimiento. I like to speak out against discrimination and all that. And every time there is a march or something like that involved, I like to go to it. Like the one we had last year in Yucca Park where State Senator [Santiesteban went]. He went and everybody started booing him, because we thought of him as a vendido, somebody that sells out to the white society.

C: What does the word vendido mean to you?

H: Vendido, to me, means somebody that has power like the State Senator, judge, commissioners or something like that, but yet he doesn't use his power for the Chicano Movement. Like Alderman E. H. Baeza looks like a vendido from what I've heard about him, but yet he comes along and gets a lot of votes. I don't know why, but he does get a lot. Maybe [it's] because of his name, E. H. Baeza.

C: Juan, do you have anything more to say about the movimiento or Chicanismo?

H: Well, what I'd like to say is, I feel bad about the Movement. It's not at the level it used to be back in the early '70s, where almost everybody was involved. Now [only] a couple of people are involved. We have marchas and not too many people go. I remember when the first marchas started getting organized, there were about 20,000 people participating. I feel sorry that the Movement doesn't have the intensity

it used to have.

C: You feel that the movimiento is losing its strength?

H: I don't think it's losing its strength, because now a lot of Chicanos are in power; they have political power. The only thing is that a lot of people are not participating; which you don't need a lot of people to participate, you only need a couple of people who have power to participate [and] really get things done.

C: ¿Tienes más que decir?

H: No, ya no.

C: ¿Quiéres cambiar el tema ahora?

H: ¿A qué lo vas a cambiar?

C: ¿Quiéres hablar de mojados?

H: Oh, mojados, yeah. One thing [that comes] to mind is the Rodino Bill. I work for the Immigration Department and [from what] I've heard about it, I don't like it. I got a memorandum from one of the heads in Washington, D. C., in which he said that he was approving the Rodino Bill. He said that he approved the Rodino Bill [because it does not] matter if somebody's name is Juan Garcia or Joe Smith, Juan Garcia has the same rights as Joe Smith. Only Juan Garcia has to prove that he is a U.S. citizen or a legal resident; but after he proves this, he has the same rights as Joe Smith. I was wondering what the Rodino Bill means to him. Does it mean that immigration officers would have the right to stop anybody that has dark skin, brown eyes, and characteristics like that and ask them if they have their papers, which is against constitutional [rights].

C: So you feel that Mexicans should be expected to prove their citizenship?

H: Not when they don't have too. But what I mean by "not" is when they are walking down the street. They should not have anybody come up to them and say, "Hey, let me see your papers." That's ridiculous. They should prove their citizenship or show their resident papers when they come from across from Juárez after a night out drinking and carousing, but not just walking the streets. I don't think so. Not even going to somebody's house and saying, "Hey, I hear you are here illegally. Let me see your papers," unless they have a search warrant (that is probable cause for a search warrant).

C: ¿Crées que existe un problema de illegal aliens? Is there a large number of illegal aliens in this country?

H: Yes, there are a lot of illegal aliens. I know a truck driver that is an illegal alien. I heard one of the Mexican diplomats from México say that Anglos are shouting that Mexican illegal aliens are taking away their jobs; but he said that the aliens are not taking away their jobs, they're taking the jobs that the Anglos don't want, that Anglos would rather go on welfare than go out and pick up garbage or something like that.

C: So you think that the illegal aliens are not taking the jobs that U.S. citizens could have?

H: No, because U.S. citizens want good jobs. They want to work some place where they have two coffee breaks, an our off [for lunch], double time, and things like that. People, Americans, don't want jobs that involve picking up garbage and sweeping the streets and things like that.

C: So you feel that they are not taking away jobs that belong to U.S.

citizens?

H: No, I don't think so.

C: Está muy bien. Juan, do you have anything else to say about illegal aliens? ¿Te acuerdas cuando estabas en "el segundo" que venían gran número de mojados a Estados Unidos?

H: Sí. Veía a muchos que se cruzaban el río y yo no les ponía atención porque ellos nomás venían [a vender] cigarros o a pedir dinero o algo así. La mayoría de la gente que se cruza aquí en El Paso nomás vienen por un tiempo aquí a vender cigarros; no se quedan a trabajar. La mayoría de los mexicanos, los que se vienen para este lado que van a trabajar o quieren un trabajo suave o algo, se van para Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, o una parte de éstas. No se vienen aquí a El Paso, porque aquí no hay trabajos.

C: No es necesariamente aquí en el border area; they go into the interior of the United States.

H: Sí. Pues se van al interior porque pagan más dinero por trabajar.

C: Bueno, está muy bien. Juan, quiero darte las gracias por dar tu tiempo y cooperación. Muchas gracias, Juan.