

9-15-1976

## Interview no. 322

William Rivera

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 William Rivera by Oscar J. Martinez, 1976, "Interview no. 322," 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](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO  
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: William Rivera (1931- )  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 15, 1976  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO.: 322  
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 322  
TRANSCRIBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE TRANSCRIBED: \_\_\_\_\_

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

(Current Assistant to the Vice President for Academic Affairs at U.T. El Paso) Born in El Paso on January 26, 1931; graduate of Austin High School in El Paso and received a B.S. from the University of Louisville; received a Ph.D. in Chemistry.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; past job discrimination in El Paso; educational and job experiences; Anglo/Mexican relations; lack of Mexican American representation in politics; experiences at UTEP.

1 hour, 20 minutes; 33 pages.

(This is an oral history interview with Dr. Bill Rivera, Assistant to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the University of Texas at El Paso, the 15th of September, 1976. Interviewing is Oscar Martinez, Department of History, U.T. El Paso.)

M: Would you tell me when and where you were born?

R: I was born in El Paso, Texas, January 26, 1931.

M: Did you grow up in El Paso?

R: I was born and grew up in the same house till I was 18.

M: Where was this? What part of town?

R: I guess it's the Northeast--over by Austin High School on Nashville and Stevens streets.

M: Could you give me a little bit of background on your parents--where they came from, what your father did, what your mother did?

R: Both my parents were born in Mexico. My father was born in Zacatecas. I honestly don't know why they came to El Paso or how they got up here, but they came to El Paso. My father went into the Army, he was a Mexican citizen. When he came out he went to work for the city of El Paso. At some point he was working for himself as an auto mechanic and then he ended up working for the city of El Paso as an auto mechanic until he retired. My mother was a housewife all the time.

M: Do you know when they came to El Paso from Mexico?

R: No; sometime before the beginning of the First World War.

M: During the Revolution? A lot of people came during that time.

R: It was in that period, but I never heard any stories about why or what or anything like that.

M: You say your father served in the Armed Forces of the United States during World War I?

R: Right. He was in the Army and he was over in France in one of the periods where I think all people of that age were. I think, even though they don't quite say it as much now (but they still do), they're proud of serving their country. It was sort of a milestone, one of the few things he had pictures and remembrances of.

M: Did he volunteer?

R: Yeah.

M: As a Mexican citizen?

R: Yeah. In the group that he was in, he's got pictures, and there are a few other Mexicans, but not very many.

M: Do you come from a big family?

R: There were like two families, even though it's the same mother and father. There were four of us, two sisters and then myself and another brother who died; and then my next sister is something like eight years younger than my brother was. After that there were three more sisters and another brother. So there were eight of us, but sort of in two halves. When I was in college, they were in grade school. My older sister has two kids, I've got five, my other sister has five, and the next ones have two and one. I guess like all families, they're going down in numbers.

M: What influence did your parents have on you in terms of formation of character and personality?

R: Well, a lot, in the sense that they always told us what to do, they always made us do what they wanted us to do. You don't always follow it to the letter, but you kind of knew who was boss even though they did it in a good way. They showed us a lot. In whatever they did, they taught us to be polite and to respect people, what was right or wrong. If you did right or wrong, at least you knew the difference. They taught us to take

care of ourselves and to work. My sister started really supporting herself I guess since she was about 12, working down at Kress's and places like that where...Well, there were certain places you could get a job and certain places where you couldn't. So she started working then and worked all the time; she works now. I got a paper route when I was 13 and kept the thing till I went away to college, and I went a year here. So I was 18 when I left, and my other sisters did pretty much the same. They didn't force us into things, but we did things somehow.

M: You mention that your sister was working at Kress's, and you said that there were certain jobs that you could get and certain jobs that you couldn't. What do you mean?

R: Well, she applied at the telephone company, and Mexicans didn't get jobs in the telephone company. She applied at Standard Oil, and Mexicans didn't get jobs at Standard Oil. The telephone company or any of those others were always on the idea that they didn't want any accents, even though my sister never had anything that you could class as a Spanish accent, just because she didn't. But Mexicans didn't get jobs in those particular places at that time. At the gas company I had a good friend who was a big wheel that ended up being a vice-president; he was an old-timer from the gas company. I used to deliver his papers. Well, he got me a job and I thanked him for it. I don't mean it badly; but even there, where I had a friend, the jobs that I would get were out as a yardman in their pumping stations, or out on the pipeline. You didn't get an office job or a clean job. They do now, but they didn't then.

M: This was an Anglo official in the company getting a job for you, and yet your Anglo peers would get better jobs--is that what you're saying?

R: Yeah. On the other hand, I couldn't tell you for sure that if I had told

him, "I want an inside job," that he would not have gotten me one; I don't know. But it wasn't a common sort of thing. But, on the other hand, summer jobs, too, were a little different. But I do know that when I think of things like that, my sister is the one that I look at, because she was in front of us; and I didn't try the things she had done if she had run into trouble. She was kind of blazing the way a little and made things a lot easier. My choices were based to some extent on the reception that she had gotten at different places.

M: Are you convinced that your sister was discriminated against in employment?

R: Oh, yeah; there's no question about it. But at that time, it's funny, because you didn't call it "discrimination." You'd get sort of mad, but you didn't think about it quite as much as you do now. It was sort of almost, "Well, that's the way it is. In the springtime the leaves come out, and at that place you don't get a job." It was just as natural, one as the other. It's funny, because it really didn't leave you with this feeling that, "I'm being cheated." You knew that you were, but you felt that it was sort of inevitable, and what was the point of upsetting your breakfast over it.

M: What years are we talking about?

R: '44, somewhere in there; and later. I can think along that same line, but a little different, about when I went off to school in Kentucky. It was in September of '49 and I hopped on my bus here. When I got to Odessa and the bus stopped and I went in to eat, I made sure that I ordered breakfast in good, clear, English so that they knew that I spoke English. I don't know that they would have thrown me out; but it's just perception that you have, because of the things that have happened in the past, that you might run into trouble. So you pay your insurance money by making

these sort of outward sounds or motions or whatever to clean yourself up, if you want to call it that. I was never mistreated in that way, really, but you know it happened. It could have been a year, it could have been two years, it could have been six months before (I'm not sure of the date), there had been a softball team from here that had gone there, and one of the players was a Mexican from here (who, in fact, is a coach at one of the high schools now). He had to stay in a different place than the rest of the team did and he had to eat in particular places. So while I say I was not ever, that I can remember, directly affected by that, still these things were in my mind. "That happened here, so I will watch out." So you did. You watched where you went and how you acted, which sounds, maybe, "chicken;" but still you did it and didn't feel bad about it. You didn't feel like you were copping out or anything else, 'cause there was never a direct confrontation. It was just, "If I do this, I know probably nothing will happen."

M: You were conscious that you were Mexican, you were conscious that you were dark.

R: I was conscious that I was out of place in a particular place.

M: You speak with no accent, really. Did you make an effort to speak that way?

R: I don't think I ever had an accent, because where we lived, close to Austin High School, at the time we lived out there, there were about two more houses within a range of seven or eight blocks. There was the high school, a block of nothing, our house, another block, two houses. So there was not much there, and all the people around were Anglos. And this was the other thing: My father, before he went into the Army and bought this house for his mother, he lived in the region of Second Ward,

then down around Alameda Street and places like that. Then when he came back from the Army and he and my mother were married, he, in my opinion, made an effort to move out of there and move into the Anglo territory; because he certainly had no reason to get out there, because where he worked was much closer to where he bought the house for his mother. He worked over on Lee and Magoffin, by Cotton and the railroad tracks. So he was moving far away from where he worked, and the only reason that I think he could have done it would be that he felt we would get a better education, a better life, or whatever you want to call it--again, right or wrong. These days some people would say, "Well, that's a cop out thing to do." But he never lost any of his Mexican feeling or anything like that; he just felt, I think, that that was the best thing for us, and so he did it. Maybe he just moved out there because it was cheap; I don't know. Sometimes you put all of these thoughts into other people's minds.

But nevertheless, we grew up with nothing but Anglo kids, Anglo families. My parents would speak to us in Spanish or English, equally one as the other, and they probably spoke more correct English than a lot of the people around us, even though they were supposedly uneducated. I know that my mother wrote better than 90% of the people around. But we would generally answer them in English. Whether on purpose or not, I don't know. Whether it was a conscious thing of saying, "If I do this, I will not be as much of a Mexican," or whatever, I don't know. But we very seldom spoke Spanish to our parents, even though they spoke to us in Spanish much of the time; maybe half and half. But it didn't matter; it was just one of those intermittent things. You'd hear a word and it didn't matter if it was in Spanish or English, it meant the same.



M: Did your parents emphasize the need to learn English correctly?

R: Well, I can't remember a particular effort; but on the other hand, I know that school and things of this type were pushed, and they always corrected you whether it was in English or whatever you were doing. So in that sense, yes. But I don't ever remember any lectures of how you hear this thing, "You've got to do this to get ahead." I can't remember that sort of approach ever with English or anything else, really.

M: In those days it was common with many families to push their kids into learning correct English because this was the road to success. But you don't recall that in your family?

R: Maybe we just did, so that it was never a point. We didn't have anything to "unlearn" like some of the people that come from Mexico and have learned a full vocabulary of Spanish and no English; then they have to come and do the switch. We never had to do the switch, we were just learning up one track. So if we happened to learn it well, then there wasn't any need for any lectures of, "You've got to watch yourself and do well at this," because it was just there.

M: When you were a kid, were most of your friends Anglos?

R: All of them were. In thinking back, when I was young, you felt sometimes (and at the time I'm not sure that I did) that instead of feeling uncomfortable that you were a Mexican in an Anglo neighborhood, you felt more uncomfortable in going to visit your relatives and that you were an Anglo-cized Mexican in a Mexican neighborhood. I always felt more uncomfortable in going to my relatives' places, and maybe that, for instance, is one of the reasons that I'm not close to any of my relatives other than my immediate family--my brothers, my sisters, and my mother. Uncles and cousins don't mean a thing to me; they never did. I shouldn't put it quite like

that, but I mean, you know how some people are really close. If we are going to get together on Thanksgiving, well, you know that every uncle in the world, every cousin is going to be there, and they're going to be really happy to see each other. I'm happy to see them; but there are two of my mother's brothers who I'm really close to and I'm not sure that my closeness to them isn't more because of the way they take care of my mother. I don't know; I shouldn't say that, because one of them I'm really closely attuned to in attitudes, and so we get together a lot like that. But I would be close to him whether he was a relative or not, I think is more the point. My father's relatives--there's one of my cousins that I'm very close to. My uncles and my aunts on his side, I can't think of one of them I've seen in probably 10 years. It's that kind of thing. I don't know what to attribute it to. Some of these relatives of my father, I probably got a little bent out of shape with them because of the way that they treated him and my mother with regard to money. He was taking care of them and my grandmother, and when he died, some of them ended up with the house that he had paid for on the premise that that was their mother's house and they should get as much as my mother got. But that's a different thing, my point being that I would be really more uncomfortable in going down that way than with the Anglos. All my friends when I was growing up were Anglos. There weren't any Mexicans that lived in the neighborhood. I can't think of anybody that lived close. After a while, there was one that lived about three blocks away.

M: Did you feel different in that setting with your Anglo peers?

R: I think probably about the time I got into grade school, I started feeling a little different because there was always someone to remind you of it. Maybe if it hadn't been that, it would have been something else, because

these were generally the kids that you would class as the "bullies," who would say something or start something. Where I really started noticing it more was when I got into junior high and high school, because then is where you start getting the social separation--who you can go out with and who you can't. See, then I really found myself in a box. I'm not sure that maybe it was better that way. But I was in a position, at least in my own mind, of kind of being "neither/nor." I felt uncomfortable going to the Mexican houses, because, socially, I was uncomfortable. Then socially I started feeling this uncomfortableness with the Anglos. So as far as I was concerned, girls didn't even exist till I got out of high school.

M: Weren't there other kids in your same position that you could socialize with?

R: Yeah. This is the thing: I'm not sure that it was really there, because I'm sure that you've known a lot of Mexican kids that have gone to predominantly Mexican high schools that didn't go out, and then you attribute it to something else. Anglos are the same way. Anglo guys went to Anglo high schools and for some reason they didn't go out. So the fact that I didn't fool around with girls through high school may have been attributed to this or it may be attributed to something else.

M: But then again you did feel uncomfortable.

R: Oh, yeah; because all the time I would have my friends, but then when they would have parties I would not be invited.

M: Your Anglo friends?

R: Yeah, or my Mexican American friends, either ones. Nobody would invite me. I was never invited to a high school party of any variety, and I didn't go around dragging my head in the sand. I just knew that, "That's

coming up and I'm not going." I was aware of it. There were certain times when I really thought about it and felt bad about it, but maybe I was a good rationalizer and maybe after a few years I sort of got used to it. "That's the way it is, that's what's going to happen."

M: Were you very studious?

R: Half and half. In high school I wasn't nearly as much as I had been all through grade school; in grade school I was super. When I got into junior high I think maybe I made a mistake, because at that time you could start school in September or January, so I had started in January because of my birthday. So, anyway, instead of graduating in the mid-year, I went to summer school at the end of the seventh grade, so I got half a year ahead of all the kids that I'd gone through school with from kindergarten. So then I got into junior high with a new group of kids, none of whom I knew. So that threw me off some because again I was completely alone.

M: What incidents stand out in your mind from your elementary school days?

R: Well, I don't really think there are any particular incidents. I was really a good student. Egotistically speaking, I guess I was smart; I was up at the top of the class. I didn't really feel the "Mexicanness", if you want to call it that, at that point. I felt through grade school more of a feeling of mixing with my mother and my father. It wasn't that they changed so much, it was just that you grew up. I remember just silly things like them taking us to school. And then there was a park right next to it and we went there. So we'd do a lot of things like that. But as far as school goes, the only thing I can really remember is that I did well in school and I did well in sports. In school at that point there wasn't any of this little league stuff, and so we mixed and we had

a good time. There was a lot of that kind of social activity. I had a lot of friends, but they were all Anglos. That's just what the neighborhood was.

M: Do you remember any teachers who had any special influence on you? Authority figures?

R: Well, I kind of liked all of my teachers for some reason. I remember my kindergarten teacher. Then there was a Reading teacher who ended up being a big wheel in the public schools here--Marguerite Smith--who influenced me a lot, I think, because I liked to read. And I don't know how much of that was her or how much of that was my family, but I used to read just tons of books of all varieties. But as far as grade school, I remember those two more than any of the others.

M: Are there any ethnic related or oriented incidents that you remember when you were a kid in grammar school, junior high, or high school?

R: No. The only thing that I think of along that line, that I think affected me in any strong way, was just the social thing. That is, as you got older, you were restricted more in what you were included in. In grade school, there wasn't anything; before grade school, you always had these little girlfriends. There wasn't any problem with that; you get into grade school and that's okay too. But then you get into high school and the sort of prestige things... Well, you never saw anything but Anglo cheerleaders, and this was a big deal. Now I think it's really stupid, but that's okay, too. I don't mean I ever wanted to be one, but you just knew that wasn't going to be; those things were Anglo things. The National Honor Society, school clubs were not for you. I don't think I belonged to anything in high school; none of those things. You just didn't.

M: Looking back, I'm wondering if not belonging to any of these groups and

not fitting into the Anglo group or Mexican group, if that was not a blessing in disguise, because then your energies were concentrated into your school work and it did not interfere with future plans to go into higher education, and if actually very few individuals from your background were in that kind of a position.

- R: That could be. You didn't directly ask me about people that affected me, but you asked me about teachers; and I have often thought that there's one guy that I think really affected me, or one period of my life that I think really affected me. It's funny, because it's one of these mundane, nothing things. This was my paper route. This guy that was the district manager, in those days they didn't do like they do now and change every two months; these guys were people that really had an effect on you. For one thing, they were authority figures; they were bosses, they were directors, they were encouragers, they were helpers. These were good people. Not all of them, but most of them were uneducated, older--not ancient, probably about as old as I am now. (Chuckles) But you'd have to go out and collect your money every week. Every Saturday I knew where I had to be; I had to be paying old Ben Rush his money for the stuff. If you weren't there, there wasn't any of this, "Gosh, I wonder where he is." It was just a lot of hell raising or firing or getting on you or whatever. So you really learned how to take care of responsibilities and you had to be there to do things. People always feel that it's not now how it was in the good old days, but I really do think that the idea of a job meant more from both sides. You took it as more and they demanded more. The thing that it did to me most was... I don't know if I was a "shrinking violet," but I'm sure that I probably kept to myself more than a lot of people did. So on this thing you had to go every day and every week and

knock 200 to 300 doors and ask them for your quarter, and it allowed me to meet a lot of different people and a lot of different types of people-- guys that were ready to break your neck because the paper was 15 minutes late in the morning and really crazy things; and then people that were very nice to you, that went out of their way to do anything that you wanted. You got rid of some of this feeling that you had built up in yourself over the years; I think you might even call it lack of respect or of self-respect. I never consciously felt that, but I think that you have to after you start getting excluded from things whether you ever admit it to yourself directly or not. You just know that it has affected you in some way, where you feel restricted from going somewhere, not because anyone has told you not to go there, but because no one has invited you, but they have invited everyone else. It sounds crazy sometimes, but I honestly think I got more of an education in everything in my years of throwing my paper route and being my own boss and meeting all these people, good people and bad people, and learning how to deal with them, the ones that were prejudiced against me and the ones that were prejudiced for me. I think that was the best thing that ever happened to me. It's a funny sort of thing. This guy that was my boss, when I'd come back from school he'd always encourage me.

M: It seems that your time was taken up by activities that in the long run would help you a great deal. It's ironic, because in a sense you were on the "outs" in school. I relate to what you're saying because I went through a similar experience. It's interesting.

R: I hadn't forgotten about that, but you just kind of go around it. That was one of the things that my parents, mainly my mother, did push me into. I wasn't keen on taking one of those paper routes because of the

fact that I'd have to talk to people and collect money. Getting up and throwing papers didn't bother me; it was the confrontations with people. So she did pretty much push me into that and I was really happy for it. My boss just really took care of me and trusted me and forced me to do things. And he was an old Mississippi type, a redneck, if you want to call him that. He was just a plain, formally uneducated guy that knew really how to treat people. Again, see, you don't know what to attribute things to. I was very interested in sports all through school, and I still am. In grade school we always had these teams and we'd go all over and play. When I got to high school, I guess I had really started getting this feeling of being on the "outs" more or less, but you don't know whether it's really that or whether you are not aggressive enough to get into the thing. So when I went out for the football team, well, I always had this paper route to fall back on. I'd go practice; I'd go throw my papers. I was always late, so after a while, as it became a drag and I wasn't getting to play on the teams, well, then it was easy for me to say, "Well, I've got to do this, so the hell with it."

One thing that really does bother me is that I don't know in my own mind what my motivation was there, whether I really gave it a shot and somebody kept me out of it, whether I didn't give it a shot because I was not aggressive enough, or whether I really had this obligation feeling for other things that I had to do. That's one of the few things that I've got that I just feel very mixed about, but I can't do anything about it.

M: One important thing here, putting this situation in a larger perspective, is that it's interesting to categorize the experiences that people of your generation went through; and given a set of circumstances, it would be interesting to see what people eventually did, given those conditions



and those circumstances. Where did people in your own particular situation wind up, given the activities they were or were not involved in? Then, other categories, of Mexican students doing other things and where did they wind up? Then the relationship with the Anglo population, because very few people from your background went on to higher education.

R: Well, that's true. One thing egotistically that I feel is that I know myself pretty well, and I've often wondered whether in having not gotten into a lot of these other things that I spent more time thinking about me; I don't know. There are a lot of things. For instance, when I got this Navy ROTC scholarship, we had to go to Dallas to get a physical and get interviewed. I was a little uncomfortable, but I think I was just as uncomfortable as anyone would be in that situation. I can't remember having a feeling of, "I might be in bad trouble because of being of Mexican origin," and so on. That didn't bother me. It did in the sense that I told you, when I was in the bus going up to Louisville, and I was a little apprehensive in going through Texas; and then as you go through Arkansas and you start thinking, "I wonder if they'll think I'm black; if they don't know what I am, they'll just decide to treat me as one," and things like this.

M: We were talking about this question of ingredients for success, in a larger sense, at the time that you were going to school. For Mexican Americans, what was the path that they had to take to go on and get degrees in higher education? What were the special circumstances that needed to come together in order for people of your own situation to be able to get on that path to success?

R: I don't know. Well, I put a lot of value on the fact that I had two people to follow, my two sisters; so I had two people who had gone through

grade school and always done well, had gone through high school and always done well. When I got out of high school, my oldest sister was finishing college and had always done well. So there were some of those choices that I'm not sure were really choices. I somehow just assumed that I was going to college. But on the other hand, I know there are a lot of other people who assumed that they were going to college and didn't. Then I got this Navy ROTC scholarship that paid my tuition and my books and \$100 a month, so this put me in a different category from having to sit there and sweat out a lot of the money thing, though it still didn't cover everything. But I was certainly more independent. Well, I could have stayed here and gone to school, and probably in terms of money I would have been about the same off, maybe even better. But I went off to school, and once I got started there was never any thought of not finishing. Then when I got through with that, I went off to the Navy. So I had a path.

Of course, I'd like to think that I got there by what I had done on the way up, but I had a lot of little breaks here and there, and people helping me, in a sense. But I do also feel that my parents always encouraged me, while some parents in the same situation as mine were saying, "Go to work. What are you going to school for?" My parents never did that; mine were always encouraging us to go to school and to get as much education as we could. But they never thought in terms of a Ph.D. "Get as much education as you could" meant at least finish high school and probably go on to college. For instance, when I got out of the Navy I went to work in Fort Worth for two years. Then I decided to go back to school. I didn't know it until sometime after, in fact I think my Dad was even dead, but one of my brothers-in-law told me that my Dad had asked him if

it was really worthwhile for me to go off and do that. I had a degree and I was making good money. Why did I want to quit my job and go back to school? Was it really worth it or not? But he never discouraged me. In fact, he never said anything to me about it. I think there is a limit as to how high "higher education" could really be visualized by people in his frame of reference. A doctorate, I don't think, had any meaning. I don't mean that they didn't know what it was, but it wasn't the kind of thing everybody just went and got.

M: Where did you get your B.S.?

R: At the University of Louisville. That's what I got with my Navy ROTC scholarship, and then I went back and got my Ph.D. at the same place on the G.I. Bill. So, I mean, that was another thing. I like to think I had something to do with it, but still, there were a lot of circumstances that went to make my thing fall into place, and maybe easier than for other people. You could argue that I got into this Navy thing rather than get drafted. That could be, I'm certain that that was in there somewhere. If there hadn't been a draft, if the Korean War wasn't around, maybe I wouldn't have ever thought about it. I can't remember consciously thinking of that, but all those things enter into it.

M: I don't know if anyone has made the statement to you, but one often hears it. You have a Ph.D., you have a good position in a university, and people hear of these statements regarding discrimination in the past; and they look at you and say, "Well, look, you made it. That means there was opportunity. What's wrong with the rest of them?" How do you respond to that?

R: I respond to it like this. I was fortunate in how I was brought up in terms of being raised learning English from right when I was born and

so on. I went into an Anglo school that was in the "good part of town" so that the schools that I went to were good schools and the people were still taking care of you. And while there might have been discrimination, there wasn't segregation, because there weren't enough of the "me's" for any of them to worry about. So I got as much as anyone else did out of the schooling. Somebody who had come up, being born and raised in the Second Ward or something like this and learned Spanish, it's easy enough for someone to say, "Well, you made it; they could have, too." Well, they always sort of preface it with, "If they really wanted to." When do you realize what it is that you need to make it? When you're 14, you're 14 years behind. That's a hell of a thing to overcome. I didn't have to overcome that kind of thing. I didn't know what I was getting into; some of these things just happened to me. I might have had to overcome some prejudice, but I didn't really have to overcome the educational barriers that people who are born down in the Second Ward had to do. There's no comparison. That's what always makes me mad when I hear people with this stuff, "If they wanted to, they could do it." I feel like telling them, "Chop a leg off and then tell yourself that you can be a world champion high jumper." You're starting with such a handicap that if you make it you're really unusual. There's no way that you can put it together with, "If you don't make it, it's 'cause you're lazy; anybody can do it." It doesn't go that way. That's my opinion.

M: But this attitude is widespread.

R: Oh, certainly; sure. It's there. The man that gave me my first job... See, this is another reason why, when people tell me, "You're there because of us," I say, "Bull. The guy that hired me did it because I was from here and they needed somebody to fill the job. I had a Ph.D. and

that's what he needed." He was not certainly, how would you say, "bending over backward" to take care of Mexicans. I had been a student of his class the one year that I went here and we were friendly, but his attitudes would always come out. On an everyday scale, they were all right; but when it would come down to the irritation point, it was, "Those damn Mexicans. If they wanted to learn they could learn. This happens because they are just too lazy to do that." As you say, that attitude is there among people who have been here a long time.

M: This was the attitude with the professor, the person who hired you eventually at UTEP?

R: This was after I was hired that he was making those comments about students that had done particular things.

M: Your Ph.D. is in Chemistry?

R: Yes.

M: At the time that you got your Ph.D., do you know how many Mexicans there were with Ph.D.s in Chemistry?

R: No. I was conscious that I was in a very small minority, but it's funny because I was more conscious... See, again, this was ego. At the time, I thought, as we all do when we finish, we say, "This was a damn good trick I pulled off." Then you start counting up and saying, "How many people are there like me in the United States this year?" So you play that game. But there weren't very many; I don't honestly know right now. I belong to an organization that keeps changing its name, but I think at the moment it's the Society for the Advancement of Chicano and Native American Scientists, and there are very, very few scientific Ph.D.s in the U.S. (These are sciences or engineering.) There just aren't very many. The roster of what we claim to be the roster of essentially all

of them is just not very thick.

M: About how many are there?

R: I would say from 90 to 100 at the most. I don't think there's even that many Ph.D.s. I can't even think of 50 that I've heard of. There are a lot of Cubans.

M: They fall under a different category.

R: That's why people would tell me, when I started telling them numbers, they'd say, "There are a lot of Spanish names in the American Chemical Society Directory." But they're Cubans, South Americans, Spaniards, or Puerto Ricans, not the Mexican American Ph.D.s. There just aren't very many; very, very few.

M: When did you get your Ph.D.?

R: In 1962.

M: You don't have any information about how many Ph.D.s in Science or Engineering there were at that time, who were of Mexican background?

R: No. When you go out to one of the Chemical Society meetings, you wouldn't see very many brown faces in there. You still don't. I mean, they weren't restricted to Ph.D.s, but you just didn't see them.

M: Could you trace the jobs that you've had over the years beginning with that job as a newspaper boy? What other jobs have you had?

R: Well, I haven't had all that many. I've had the job of throwing the papers, so that was as a paper boy. Then I worked as a district manager for the newspaper in the summer, just taking over when these guys would go over on their vacations. Then I worked for the gas company as a yardman in the summertime, watering grass and cutting weeds and this sort of thing. When I went off to school in Kentucky, I worked in the cafeteria and worked as a bartender; I worked delivering mail. That's all that I can

think of. Then I went into the Navy for three years and was an engineering officer on the ship. When I got out, I went to work for General Dynamics in Fort Worth as a nuclear engineer. Then I left there and went back to Graduate School, and from there I came here. Then I've been a consultant out at White Sands. That's the only regular consultant type thing of major importance that I've had. Then I've gotten into different little businesses in town, in and out of them. That's most of it.

M: You were in the Korean War?

R: At the tailend. I went into the Navy in 1953, from 1953 to 1956. That's the other thing. You start looking for Mexican American officers or blacks or any minorities, and at that particular time there weren't very many. There were some. There was one Mexican American admiral. I was at a conference in May, and there was a very small number of Mexican American captains. The numbers are getting larger, but that's in the range that I would have been. I should have been a captain, probably in four or five years by now, had I stayed in; so that's the range that hits the age group that I'm in. There just weren't very many.

M: Were you conscious of that?

R: I was more conscious of it in the Navy than I was anywhere else--not because people made me conscious, but I'm not sure what it was that made me aware of the fact that there weren't very many officers that weren't Anglo. I was there for three years, but certainly in the squadron that I was in--there were five ships, probably 250 men--I never saw another one. After that I can't remember seeing any. There must have been, but I can't remember seeing any in any of the ships. I just don't remember seeing any in my whole Navy career. I see a number of them now.

M: Are there any ethnically oriented or related experiences while you were in the Service?

R: No, not bad [experiences]. This is the thing that is funny. Particularly in Hong Kong, the orientals would take you as an oddity, because they were brown, too, but you were a different brown. Like when I went to Kentucky, it was the same way; that was always strange to me. You get conscious of being brown in an Anglo neighborhood and there are particular times in your life when it hits you when you just want to erase yourself. Then you go into a different situation--it's so strange to me--you go up to Kentucky and here they are prejudiced against the same type of coloration, but it's a little darker and of a different background. But you come out there and you are an oddity and they've seen too many movies about the Spanish lovers and so on, so all of a sudden you find yourself being put into this sort of category. For a while, I wasn't sure how to take the thing. This sounds really stupid, but I was sitting there in a class and here comes this sweet young thing and she plopped down in my lap. So you think, "My God!" Not that, that it's an unusual sort of behavior for an 18-year-old girl and an 18-year-old boy, but it wasn't the sort of thing that would've happened to me around here. See, afterwards I started finding out that all of my perceptions of my classmates were not quite what they would have been; maybe that would have happened here, maybe I was reacting in such a way that I sort of resisted any approaches from Anglos. It's hard to say what causes things. But that was one thing that I found out very quickly. I was there two days and there were a lot of country girls that would come to the big city to work, so there were tons of girls. I was walking in this park one day and they started this kind of forward flirting which I hadn't experienced.



I knew what was coming off, but it was just unusual. To me it's very interesting that these girls, who would not even be seen talking to a black, would then be attracted by pigmentation with a different person.

M: Do you have the feeling that somehow you were placed in the exotic category?

R: Yeah. It was like a new brand of snake.

M: I heard some girls talking about the Arab students here, and at one point they were "the" boys to date. There were something different and exotic.

R: That's exactly the feeling I had.

M: During your youth, did you feel the need to achieve?

R: I didn't feel it, but it may have been there, because I always did. See, that's the funny thing. I never have felt that I knowingly had that feeling of, "I'm going to outdo somebody." I just did. I never felt that, "I'm going to show them, by God, that I'm as good as they are." I did it, I think. Again, egotistically, I think I did. I don't ever have that feeling that consciously I said, "I'll show them." Someway I always did for some reason.

M: You just took it for granted that you were going to go up.

R: Yeah.

M: How do you account for the many Chicanos of your generation who have not made it?

R: They had too many strikes against them. It's so easy when you've got this educational draw back. It's hard to keep going to school, it's hard to get hammered with stuff that you're doing badly; and then you get married and so it's easier to do that. You've got all these pressures of people telling you, "Why go to school?" So you don't; it's too hard.

- M: Of the people in your age group who have achieved a measure of success, have you noticed a correlation between skin pigmentation and position?
- R: Yes. "The lights shine on." There is where I feel more odd about whatever my success might be. That is one thing I always felt and maybe it's something that everyone feels. But I know that the people (like when I was talking about cheerleaders), whenever you would have an exception, it was the light-skinned person. You never saw a dark-skinned person have an exception of that type, no matter what it was. There were some that were super students, but they were not the included.
- M: As you look around today in higher education, as well as in other areas, of people in your age group or older, do you notice that most of these Mexican Americans are light skinned?
- M: I think it extends even down. I think it's still there; not as much, but it's still there. The funny thing is that it kind of goes like this: If you speak perfect English... And like you say, I have no accent. Maybe this was part of it. There were a lot of these things that my parents pushed that I never did realize or maybe I pushed on myself more than I realized. To get rid of the accent you will be accepted or something like this. But the non-accent, dark skinned person is at a disadvantage to a light skinned, accented person. Of course, the best combination is the no accent and the light skin. That's really a gross thing. But the thing that always bothered me is, why is it that people can be friends; but in social gatherings other than the incidental day-to-day confer meetings, then in appearance the dark skin is out of place in an Anglo society, like you were plain figures around the room. I never could quite understand that.
- M: What about the place of origin? How does that enter into the positions

achieved by people? I'm thinking about regional differences within the United States or from being from a particular region in Mexico. Have you perceived any difference?

R: No, I haven't perceived any difference, except from the standpoint that I think it's as crazy as the sort of thing I was trying to describe about this discrimination of whites against blacks, but not whites against latins of whatever variety in the Midwest and places like this. I think that you get down here and there are a certain group of people who will be prejudiced against Mexican nationals almost as much as an Anglo. I don't know whether it is a matter of coming in and cutting off too much of the pie. But I find a number of people I feel are prejudiced against the Mexican National latins. There is getting to be this great contingent of Mexican Americans in the Midwest; Minneapolis, supposedly, has more Mexicans than we have in El Paso. I don't know whether it's true or not. Where my wife is from in Indiana, the migrant farmers would come up and work for one of the big companies, and then they start staying there. So, there are beginning to be groups of Mexican Americans throughout the Midwest, and it would hit me that they are in the same kind of situation that Mexican people were in El Paso some years back because they certainly are catching all of the prejudice and everything in a small town, which can, I think, be pretty brutal. But on the other hand, they are seeing the same type of thing that I did, of being forced to know nothing but English, or pretty much, because that's all there is; except that they have the thing of having learned Spanish as their first language, having their parents speak in Spanish. But I think they are going to get stuck, at least be affected by this double culture. Double cultures can be good if they're double cultures by choice. I'm not sure what I think of cul-

tures that are forced on when one is kind of looked down on. Whether you like it or not, a second culture in a small community is looked on as a bad thing. That's my opinion; I don't know what a sociologist might say.

M: Were you ever made to feel ashamed of being a Mexican, during your youth or later?

R: No. If I ever was, it was by myself, I think. You say that, but every once in a while (and if you ask me for a specific, I couldn't give you one) there have been times when people have made some little aside that they don't even take as important; but it cuts you. It doesn't relate to you directly, maybe, but it's saying, "Because you are one of these, you are of this type." There are a lot of those things that go on, but I can't really think of where anyone said anything to me directly that ever made me be ashamed of being a Mexican. I can't think of anything.

M: How do you explain the lack of representation or the lack of participation on the part of Chicanos in El Paso in politics, historically, going back to when you were a youth and to the present? Although, nowadays we have more representation, proportionately it still lags far behind what it should be. How do you explain the lack of this participation in local institutions and leadership positions?

R: A resignation, in a sense. Whether it's justified or not, people just feel that, "I can't do anything about that. It's just too big for me. To be in politics you have to be a big wheel." I think until we get to be where more and more people have been through the education cycle, that it won't change appreciably. I don't believe that voter registration, and freedom of registration will straighten it out. I just think that there is a certain bunch of people that don't feel they have any effect.

Whether this is a lack of self-respect, I don't know. I don't think in those terms; it just doesn't hit me that way. But some people just feel that the thing is too big for them, that they don't really have a part to play in it, and so they just don't vote. I think there's a lot of educated people who feel the same way. I say that because with most of these elections here lately, I have felt there is no way they could have gone the way they went, if anybody is thinking. So they happen and so I say, "How did it happen? They happened because of the political structure, and that must be something that I don't completely understand," because they are so far off from what I would think would happen. I don't know what happens. Some of these guys that I think are very bad just keep getting elected. You talk to everybody and they all feel that this guy is not any good, but somebody must have voted for him. It would have to include a lot of the educated people, because if you look at the list of the polls and go down to the Mexican districts, you see that they're generally not voting as much as they ought to. I feel that they're used to having the boss system and they just resign themselves to the idea that there isn't anything they can do to change it. I don't think that's right. But I find myself voting with not quite the enthusiasm that I used to have. I try and vote everytime, but sometimes it's just a matter of form.

M: When did you first become a politically conscious person?

R: I think I was probably more politically conscious in high school than I am now, in terms of feeling that it's something to do. I never campaigned or anything like that, but I used to keep up with things and keep track of things. I used to do a lot of reading. It wasn't directed reading in terms of, "I'm going to read all this history about Roosevelt,"

or something like that; it was just a complete spectrum--magazines, newspapers, books, fictions, non-fictions. I was a big reader and I read pretty good stuff. Maybe I know more about it now than I did then, but I felt more than I do now. I just somehow can't work up too much enthusiasm anymore. Like this time, I don't feel that I care that much one way or the other. I'm a Democrat, so in that sense I care. But I'm not that enthused about either one, or, in fact, anybody that was even proposed. Maybe I'm getting old style, but the only one that I could generate any enthusiasm for was Hubert Humphrey, and he had no chance at all; so there goes that! (Chuckles)

The other thing to some extent with Mexican American participation in politics (maybe this is what people say about me), when they ask the question, "Why don't more people participate in higher education?", in some you can participate and some you have to work your way into. I was going to say about politicians that I think in a lot of ways we're letting ourselves get trapped (and maybe that's what's happening to me) in these administrative positions--out of the action, figurehead sort of things. What I was going to talk about was the people that I see when I go to these conferences. "Here is so and so who is in charge of the minority program for the Department of Defense," and here comes Mr. Super Slick, who isn't anymore talking about Mexican American problems than anything. But on the other hand, that's what you should want, this integration; so he has integrated completely into the system. He is just like an Anglo, black, green or anything else. He is a politician now. Does that mean that we finally made it, or did we just jump out the door on the other side of the car? I'm not sure. Some of those things bother me. My point is that some of these people look so slick that you say,

"I don't have any way of identifying with him. Why should I go vote for him? He looks just like the other guy except his name is Garcia." We don't have very many people, either Anglo or Mexican American, that make the blood run into you and you say, "I'm going out and vote for that guy." I think that has something to do with it, but not all of it.

M: I'd like to ask you about your experiences since you came to UTEP. You came in 1962 and you have been at this institution ever since. What changes have you seen regarding the position of Mexican American students and professors here?

R: The students' position has changed a lot. When I came here, (it's been a long time, but not that long), it was still to the point that, if you go back to the rolls of the sororities, you won't find a Mexican American name in there. You might, but it isn't a non-Anglo mix family; and even of those, there are very few of them. So the sororities were still Anglo, the fraternities were slightly bending. The idea of having a Mexican editor for the newspaper or student body president, you didn't do that kind of thing. Now, of course, all of those things are all changing. In fact, some of these things may have gotten to the other extreme, which is in a sense bad, because now nobody is participating in some of these things. You win it and then everybody else abandons it and then it goes down to nothing. I don't mean that a Mexican American student shouldn't get in there and try what he wants to on that grounds; but in some sense, that happens, or at least it appears to me that it happens. I know there are more opportunities and things that the students can participate in. The biggest thing in the faculty is that there are more Mexican Americans here certainly than there were then. I'm trying to think who was here then. I guess Fred Brewer. I can't really think

of anybody else.

M: Just Fred Brewer and yourself?

R: That's all I can think of. I can't think of anybody else. That is why, as I mentioned to you before, when somebody tells me, "You're here because of my efforts," I say, "Bull. Whatever I am, I'm here because of me and a lot of good fortunes and a lot of help."

M: Let me ask you a related question along the same lines, but for the city of El Paso as a whole. What changes have you seen, what progress have you perceived in relation to the general Mexican American population in El Paso since you have lived in this town up to the present?

R: Well, there's been an intrusion of the Mexican American on the power structure, but I think we're still sort of nibbling away at the base. It's like anything else. I was thinking of, for instance, houses and things of this type. Now you can pretty well move into anywhere that you can afford, which before you couldn't do. These things to some extent are tied to money. The downtown power structure depends on how much money and influence you've got, but there are people moving into these things. The politics, people are regularly showing up winning in political contests that they would never win before--things like the school board. Some people would argue as to the effectiveness of the people that are able to win. I think that the ones that are able to win generally have to have the Anglo support because of the lack of Mexican participation in the political system. So the guy that's able to get enough Anglo support isn't going to do the job that Mexicans want. Some I agree with, some I don't.

I think in terms of hiring or the ability to get a job, you can get a job in any occupation in El Paso; but, still, as you know better than



I, if you look in the real power positions in these companies and so on, we haven't made it yet. That's why I say, as far as I can tell, we're still just nibbling around the base. We're not fully spread throughout the whole thing. This to me is still just a matter of people holding onto the reins of the thing, because there's no other reason that I can see of why there isn't more of a mix. To believe that it's all purely by chance, then you have to become a complete disbeliever in statistics. That you can take a large group of people and the only ones that rise to the top are the Anglos, that this is purely probability, I can't believe it. What I am saying is that as far as I am concerned, there is still prejudice in El Paso, to a large extent, where it counts. Maybe things haven't changed, because this is going back to when I was in grade school. As long as it didn't count, you were allowed to do what you wanted to do. As it started counting more, which was when it got more social with the older teenage type thing, then it started becoming important and then you're pushed off a little bit as to what you can do and what you can't do. This is kind of the same way. Now you can come and play, but when it really gets serious about you being boss and really running the thing, then you've got restrictions as to what you can do and what you can't. Maybe it's self-protection. If I've got the job, do you think I'm going to let you start competing up here?

M: Would you put the Community College situation in that framework--what happened to de los Santos?

R: Yes, I think so. They can say what they want about him doing a bad job with the money, but there are a lot of people who do a bad job with the money. I don't know if he did or not, but that's the excuse they used--that you just can't do that and survive. Well, I think it depends on

who you are as to what you can do like that. He may have been bad enough, but at least I feel that, in thinking that I know a number of the people who were involved, there was certainly a lot of that feeling of being somewhat threatened by this group of Mexican Americans that were getting something going. That may be unfair to the people running it because they did have a lot to do with getting the thing started. Maybe they wanted it started, but then it started going in a different direction than what they wanted and were prepared for.

M: Bill, is there any other question that you would like to deal with? Anything that you feel that I should have asked you?

R: I hadn't thought of it too much, except you asked if I ever had the feeling of being put down, or something like that. The thing that I can think back on (and again, specifics--probably not, because it's spread over too long a period of time), the time that you feel maybe put down the most is whenever anybody says anything or implies anything about your parents. Sometimes it is things that you imagine. As I say, my parents both spoke English, but sometimes not as well as they might have. So things come out every once in a while. I'm sure every child, though, whether Anglo or what, at some point has been ashamed of Daddy or Mama or both because of something that went on. But that's about the only time that I could ever think of about feeling bad about being a Mexican American or feeling that somebody had put me down, even though it was indirectly through something that they said or some action that they took about my parents.

M: Because they were Mexican, or in relation to their ethnicity.

R: Yes.

M: Well, I want to thank you very much for your time. I certainly have

enjoyed the conversation.

R: Thank you. I appreciate it.