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Interview no. 420

Bernardo Villegas

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Bernardo Villegas (1898-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 15, 1977
TERMS OF USE: RESTRICTED
TAPE NO.: 420
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 420
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Retired Doctor of Optometry and former owner of Franklin Optical.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; school years; College of Mines; Mexican Revolution; job experiences; the Depression; Prohibition; the word chicano; opinions on the Chicano Movement and undocumented workers; old El Paso streetcars; the Chinese community in El Paso; entertainment in old El Paso; some old-time El Paso doctors.

Length of Interview: 1 1/2 hours Length of Transcript: 35 pages

Bernardo Villegas
by Oscar J. Martínez
March 15, 1977

M: Dr. Villegas, would you tell us when and where you were born, please?

V: I was born in 1898 in El Paso, in what is now called Second Ward, the corner of Third and St. Vrain.

M: Could you tell us a little bit about your parents, your background?

V: Well, my mother came from Chihuahua, from Aldama, Mexico, and my dad came from Parral, Mexico. They immigrated first to San Angelo, in Texas, about the year of 1885. Then they came back to Chihuahua, and re-immigrated here in El Paso about 1890.

M: Why did they immigrate to the United States at that time?

V: Well, no particular reason; probably the question of work, I don't know. See, my father was a carpenter. He was the father of 19 children, my grandfather had 19 also. So between them they had thirty-eight. I am about the third in line; that is, I have two older people still living.

M: That must be some kind of record. (Laughs)

V: Well, now it is! (Chuckles)

M: Do you know why they left San Angelo and went back to Chihuahua?

V: Well, these trips to San Angelo, as my father recalled, they used to go into Texas to get buffalo meat and take it down to Chihuahua. And there's a little place there called Benefique, right near San Angelo, where they used to live. Well, that was destroyed by a big flood, and all the records of birth there were also destroyed, so they had to go back to Mexico after that flood. Then they came back into El Paso.

M: When they came to El Paso, where did they settle? In South El Paso?

V: First we lived in El Paso Street near Overland; and there's where I was baptized, in Sacred Heart Church. Then we moved to St. Vrain when I was about five or six years old.

M: Was your father a carpenter in El Paso at that time?

V: Yes.

M: Did he find a job right away?

V: I don't think he had much trouble getting jobs. He built his own house right away on St. Vrain Street, a fairly large two-story house, where the present housing project is.

M: How old were you when your family immigrated into El Paso? What was the year?

V: Well, I wasn't born yet. (Chuckles)

M: When did they come here?

V: About 1890. I was born in 1898.

M: Well, what do you remember about your childhood in South El Paso?

V: [Just] a little bit. I remember my mother saying that I was baptized in Sacred Heart Church. And that same day, my godfather, who was _____ Phillips (he was a descendant of the first mayor of El Paso, Ben Dowell) was getting married at the same time. My mother was a comadre to them, so they brought them right over to the church there--the same church. Both the ceremonies were being said there, and I was baptized there.

Now [about] South El Paso I don't remember too much, because that was when I was three and four years old, maybe.

M: Where did you go to school?

V: After we moved to St. Vrain Street, then the first school I attended was Aoy School; that was around Seventh Street. You probably know that [the school] was named after a very well-known educator here in El Paso who did a lot of work for the Mexican people. He had his own private school. I went there one year, and then I came to Alamo School. Alamo School at that

time had six grades, so I attended five grades there. Mrs. Gallagher was the principal. Miss Boone and Miss Poole were very fine teachers at the time, that I can recall. I used to live on St. Vrain, and the school was on Hill, so we went right across the vacant lots to go to school when the bell rang; we were right there.

M: What stands out in your mind about your school experiences at the elementary level?

V: Well, nothing really in particular. Let me show you a picture of it.

[Pause]

After that schooling was over in Alamo, then we went for two years in San Jacinto School. Before that, though, we had to walk from Alamo School to San Jacinto School to take manual training. And midway between Alamo and San Jacinto School we met the boys that lived around San Jacinto School, so we had to fight our way through there to get to the manual training class. In San Jacinto School, I remember a lot of the boys there, like Jimmy Goggin, who is a lawyer here, and Mark Rawlings, who inherited quite a few millions from the Dodge Brothers (the automobile company), and Jack Harper. All of these boys are pretty prominent now in El Paso, and they were my schoolmates in the two years I was in San Jacinto School.

M: What do you remember about your teachers? Did you have good teachers?

V: Well, I don't think I can complain of any of them. They [were] very good teachers, as far as I can recall--very dedicated. Most of them were not married, so they had more time to devote to the work. Mrs. Gallagher, the principal at Alamo School, was a very fine person. She was the wife of Dr. Gallagher, and Mrs. Poole was the wife of Adrian Poole, who in El Paso was Customs chief for a while. And Miss Boone was a very sweet teacher. When she retired she went to Cloudcroft, where I visited

her once or twice. There's where she died.

M: Any particular incidents or experiences that stand out in your mind about your school days?

V: Well, as I say, Alamo School was mostly Mexican American, and San Jacinto School was probably 80 percent Anglos at the time--very, very few Mexican people there. In high school, there was almost no Mexicans. I attended the old high school on Arizona and Campbell [site of present UTEP School of Nursing]. When I finished the third grade there, the El Paso High School (where it is now located) was inaugurated. So I finished my senior year, I was in the first graduating class in the new El Paso High School.

M: What year was that?

V: January of 1917. See, I graduated in mid-year.

M: Why weren't there too many Mexican Americans at the high school?

V: Well, most Mexican Americans had to go to work very early, so they didn't go through too many grades; probably about the sixth grade was more or less the average. Now in Second Ward, there's a lot of people that lived there and their children became quite prominent here--for instance, the Alderetes; the Escajedas; the Calamias (probably you know, the lawyer); Anita Hague, who is the [wife] of Judge Rodriguez and the mother of the boy. And a lot of other prominent people came out from that district. But these people were very fine neighbors. They all were first and second generation Mexicans, and the immigration from Juarez was very little. There was no necessity really for immigration then. Juarez was very [well-off] economically, the peso was two for one; some of the best stores in El Paso [now] were in Juarez. There was good jobs. So there was not much of an incentive for these people to come over here at that time. The people that I'm referring to were old timers here in El Paso; there was no new immigration. See, the peso remained

more or less stable until the early days of the Depression, two for one.

M: What do you recall about your high school experiences? Anything unusual or interesting that you experienced in high school?

V: Well, I had to do a lot of working in order to continue in school. Even in grammar school I had to do a lot of work. I was a newsboy most of the time, I stuffed newspapers in the Times building on Oregon Street. I worked for a barbecue place called The El Paso Barbecue Company here in El Paso, it was situated on San Antonio [Street]. I earned \$3.00 a week for that work, delivering barbecue on my bicycle. And during the time I was in high school, I just continued working here and there, so I didn't have much [free] time. I belonged to a few clubs. The Debating Society was one of them. I remember Irving Schwartz was the president, and I was the treasurer of that society. Irving Schwartz then became president of The Popular. His brother, Manuel Schwartz, was president of The Popular Dry Goods before him. Both have died now. Then we have Chris Fox, naturally everybody knows him; he was one year ahead of me. He was quite an orator. He used to get up before the student body [and give] beautiful speeches. I never was much of that.

Now the Jewish colony used to live over in Kern Place. There was no other high school, remember, so they all came to El Paso High, all those prominent Jewish people and their sons, you know. Now these sons naturally go to Coronado [High School] and other places, but their dads all went to El Paso High School.

M: Was there much interaction between the Jewish students and the Mexican students?

V: Well, as I say, I don't remember very many Mexican students there; I really don't remember but very few of them--one or two or three. So [there] was

very little integration, there, because the Mexican people had to go to work pretty early.

M: Do you recall anything interesting or unusual in your experiences selling newspapers?

V: Yes. (Chuckles)

M: Could you tell us about some of them?

V: Naturally, I was selling papers during the Revolution, and I had a very good circulation manager. He used to phone me at the house ahead of all these extras they had; they had six, seven or eight extras a day. There was no radio, no television, so all the news came through newspapers. I remember getting stacks of papers out of the building and running down to San Jacinto Plaza, selling them all out; in about a half hour or two, there was another extra coming out!--especially during the attack of Villa here in Juarez and later on when Villa came in the second time, [when] the Americans chased him out. All that period I sold newspapers and worked in the printing room there, setting up furnaces for lead and all that business, stuffing the newspapers. At that time newspapers couldn't put out but probably an 8-page paper at a time, so if they had any more than that, we had to take the other sections and stuff them in before they were delivered. Then I delivered a lot of newspapers all over town on my bicycle, did the collecting; all on bicycle--no cars like they do now.

M: You were selling newspapers, you say, when Villa attacked Juarez in 1911, or 1913?

V: Yes.

M: Do you have any vivid memories of what happened that particular day during any of these battles that took place?

V: Well, these battles lasted three or four days, you know; and during that period, why, we had a lot of extras about people getting killed on this side. I used to go down to the bridge and get up on the boxcars that parallel the river. I remember an artillery piece--almost all was small fire, you know, rifle fire--but they did have an artillery piece right where the Customs is on the Mexican side on the Stanton Street Bridge. I don't know where they were shooting, but they were shooting, and we were up on the boxcars; and once in a while those bullets would come right close to us. But we wanted to see the action. (Laughter) That was the first battle.

M: That was 1911?

V: 1911. Now all these troops were stationed over in Smeltertown, so we used to go down there across the swinging bridge, probably a bridge three feet wide at the most, that [was] held by cables, and that thing would swing back and forth. So we'd go across there, like other hundreds of American people used to go there. They'd give them cigarettes, take flour and provisions over there to them. In other words, the rebels were very popular; the Americans were very sympathetic to them. And all these big shots [that] turned [out] to be quite important later on in the Revolution were there--Carranza, Madero, Garibaldi the Italian, General Blanco, Obregon, Orozco; all that bunch were there.

M: And you crossed over yourself?

V: Oh, yes; there was no trouble.

M: You went there several times?

V: I used to go as often as I could.

M: Did your parents know about it?

V: Well, there was no danger, you know; there was no danger at all. Well, I used

to do a lot of things without my parents' knowledge. One time I remember some neighbors of ours and myself, we took what they called the "drummer special". That was a mixed train of passengers and freight that used to go to Douglas, Arizona. So we hoboed down there; my aunt used to live there. There was a big camp there at Columbus right before the attack; there was a great big Negro cavalry camp. We used to get off there and have breakfast [with] them--it was very liberal--and keep on going to Douglas, Arizona. We were so many siblings at home, when I came back, why, they didn't even know that I was gone! (Laughter) So I got away with it.

M: What else do you remember about these battles here?

V: Well, after the battle I remember going to Juarez, the next day after the thing was settled. I think it was General Navarro who was in charge there, and he crossed over to this side. So I went over there and the streets were littered with uniforms of all sorts. And I went over to what they call the fortress on the extreme edge of the city, and that place was just torn all up. All the buildings [had] a lot of artillery holes on them and rifle fire all over, and that place was just littered with bodies there yet. They were trying to haul them out to the general hospital. That was the day after the victory, 1911.

Then in the other battle that I remember well, I was at home and pretty soon I heard some very heavy artillery shots. So I went out in the street and started to find out what it was. So I went down to Stanton Street, and there were these colored troops coming into Juarez down Stanton Street, all colored people going across to Juarez. And the artillery, I found out later, was shooting at the Hipodromo, the old race track; and they made holes all over the roof there. So Villa decided to get out, so he did. Then the

American troops came back because [the Mexicans] objected to them being there. That is the end of that.

M: Where was the artillery situated?

V: Fort Bliss.

M: Were they shooting from Fort Bliss?

V: From Fort Bliss, yes.

M: Was there any artillery located in the Rim Road area, that you remember?

V: That I wouldn't know; but the impression I got was [that it was] all from Fort Bliss. They didn't really have any necessity of going over there; they had that place spotted very nicely from Fort Bliss. But maybe there was; I don't know. So that was the last battle that I saw.

M: This was in 1919, when they repelled Villa's invasion.

V: Around 1919. During the Escobar revolution I was in mining already, and I was on a vacation here when they took that mining camp where I was working. A Yaqui Indian, a general by the name of Machichi, took that place over for a few days, [then] the revolution collapsed. General Caraveo and Salvador Ateca (General Caraveo was governor of the state once upon a time), they had a mine over in Chihuahua called La Juliana, a very rich mine. So they took all the property they had there, all the equipment they could haul out to Columbus. And Ateca, before that he was the owner of the gambling hall in Juarez. He had two big old trunks full of silver money and gold and he flew to Canada, and he was caught at the border there. For a while all that was confiscated, then he arranged so that he could take it to Europe or someplace. That's the only thing I remember of that revolution of 1929, and Adolfo... What was the President's name?

M: Adolfo de la Huerta.

V: Adolfo de la Huerta; 1929. That was the last revolution they had there.

M: Did you ever see Pancho Villa?

V: Oh, yes. Gosh, he was the most prominent guy there [at] the smelter, and I saw him several times here in Juarez and in El Paso. And I saw his wife. We used to have the Franklin Optical Company. His wife used to come down for glasses and we took a photograph of her coming out of our place. She lives in Chihuahua; she has that museum there. A very nice lady.

M: Did you ever talk to Pancho Villa?

V: No.

M: How did the people feel toward Pancho Villa here in those days?

V: Well, at that time, you know, they thought he was quite a hero. Later on they developed that he was quite a bandit. My wife had some very bad experiences from him. They lived in Toluca when all this Revolution came up. Zapata used to come in there, and then Pancho Villa came in there once. Different revolutionaries used to attack that place, so that's why they came here. In 1916 they decided to leave.

M: Now, in 1916 several important events took place on the border. Following the killing of 15 American engineers in Santa Isabel, Chihuahua, the bodies were shipped here to El Paso. I understand that here in El Paso the Anglo American people were very upset about that, and I've read in the newspapers that they wanted vengeance and that there was a mob of Anglo Americans who marched on South El Paso seeking to drive out the Mexicans in South El Paso. Do you remember anything about that?

V: No; I don't think that's correct.

M: It's in the newspapers.

V: If it had been anything really worthwhile I would have known about it.

M: You didn't hear anything about that.

V: I do remember when all these troops were going over to Juarez after Villa. The soldiers had sort of segregated all that district. All that Mexican section there was segregated, that is all I remember. But nothing connected with that massacre. Maybe so, I don't know; it must have been very little, then exaggerated and blown up.

M: Did you hear anything about a fire at the El Paso jail in March of 1916?

V: Yes. There were some Mexican prisoners there and they were disinfecting them. They used to bathe them with gasoline, to kill the bugs and so forth. And accidentally somebody lit a cigarette or something. Bang. I remember that.

M: Was there a big commotion about that in the Mexican American community?

V: Yes, naturally there was a little reaction, especially in Mexico. I remember Orozco when he was killed here [at] the border by a border patrolman, Orozco and two or three of his companions. They were brought over to the funeral home that's right next to Immaculate Conception [Church], and their bodies were there for weeks and they had processions of people going through there and seeing the bodies. Huerta, by the way, he's buried here in Fort Bliss.

M: Anything else that you'd like to tell us about the period of the Revolution? That's such an interesting period.

V: Yeah, I know; lots of stuff there, you know. My brother was a reporter for the Times and he used to go around with Villa, and he remembers an incident. Before they took Torreon, the New York Times published an article, a big headline, that Villa had taken Torreon. (This story was told by my brother.) So my brother went to him and says, "Look. What's happening? You're supposed to have taken Torreon." "Well," Villa says,

"I'll oblige you." So he went ahead and took Torreon. In that battle there were about 400 Chinese killed. I don't know why he had it against the Chinese, but they were all slaughtered. That was one of his big triumphs. I remember that story of my brother very well.

M: You graduated from high school in 1917?

V: January of 1918.

M: What did you do then?

V: Well, after that, the war was on; 1918, we were already involved in the war, so I joined the SATC--Students Army Training Corps. That was established at the School of Mines, and we were supposed to have a little bit of officer training there. I used to live at Kelly Hall [present Mass Communications Building]. They were only three buildings there--what they call Old Main, Kelly Hall, and Chemistry Building. Then we had the power house [in] which I worked many times, drilling holes for the compressor. (Laughs) We had a hard time then, 40 cents an hour. I worked all through the School of Mines mostly as a postman. For four years I used to substitute during the summer, and then the other days I used to have two hours collecting mail all around town. So for four years I was an employee of the Post Office while I was going to school. And during the period of the military part, I lived in Kelly Hall there. Lt. Bear, which you will see in one of these pictures, was the head. And we had part-time military training, and part-time was schooling.

M: So you went to college right away, after graduating from high school.

V: Yes.

M: Coming from a family of 19 children...

V: Well, we were not quite 19 at that time. Some of them [had] already died,

some of them [had] died in infancy.

M: Still, that was a big family. Was that quite unusual, a Mexican American coming from a big family and going to college.

V: Well, almost all Mexican families were large, eight, 10 or 12 were more or less average.

M: But I bet there were few Mexican Americans at the College of Mines.

V: Well, my class consisted of nine or 10, I was the only one. The class ahead of mine had Ramon Concha.

[Pause]

M: In the picture that you've just shown us about San Jacinto School I notice that most of the class was Anglo. And you yourself, looking at the picture, one would not identify you as a Mexican American.

V: Well, I never did; I never did have any difficulty at all about discrimination, never in my life. I went right through life up to the present time without absolutely no discrimination, in my jobs or profession, nothing.

M: Do you think that being very light-skinned helped in that?

V: Maybe that was part of it, I don't know. But then there are some of my family that are a little bit darker, and they never had any trouble.

M: Let me go back to your experiences at the College of Mines. Is there anything that stands out in your mind from those four years that you spent there?

V: Well, we were all pretty dedicated students. Tom Clemens, after he graduated he taught geology, he had a doctorate in geology, and he's still consulting in geology in California. That class, three of them are already dead, six of us survive. I have [an annual] here, the Flowsheet, that's the year that I graduated, 1922. I'll show you some of these pictures of the boys.

[Pause]

Dean Worrell was the head of the school. His wife was a writer and she got the idea... Before the present school was here, it was over in Fort Bliss. The El Paso Military Institute was located in Fort Bliss and that burned down, but left one or two of the buildings there more or less intact. So that became the School of Mines. And Mrs. Worrell used to travel a lot, so she got the idea of the architecture of these buildings over here from Tibet. So they followed that style of architecture, which is still followed, but not quite as much as the original buildings. You've noticed that some of these are a little bit different, not quite the same thing. If you see pictures of the buildings over in Tibet and Bhutan and all those places there, they were identical like the first buildings here in the School of Mines. Now they changed it a little bit, modernized it a little bit.

Now, I don't know whether this is appropriate or not, but Professor Worrell used to go to Juarez a lot, so he missed a lot of our classes. And naturally nobody complained except Tom Clemens, who was a very reliable student; he didn't want to miss anything. So [Professor Worrell] went to Juarez quite often. He was a very good man, very well educated and dedicated to his school. But the only thing I remember was the holiday we took because he was over there.

M: What was he doing over there?

V: Well, having a good time. (Laughter) Professor Kidd, he was quite a character. He was more or less a rough guy in his language, but very efficient, and we learned a lot from him. He taught us Geology. Speedy Nelson taught us Hydraulics. You've probably heard of Speedy Nelson, Lloyd Nelson; he died about three or four years ago.

One time I was over in Juarez myself. They had a gambling hall there, El Tivoli. And I had a dollar on number six, playing the field. And Captain Kidd comes in--we used to call him Captain, Cap Kidd. (Chuckles) He came in and saw me there. I removed myself a little bit from the table. And [he says], "Hi, Villegas. Having any luck?" I said, "No, I'm just playing around, looking around." Pretty soon that darn six comes up, so I had put a dollar on [it]. I was afraid to touch it; I had already told the professor that I wasn't playing. So here comes another six; and there's four [dollars]. I glanced at the table and glanced at the professor; and my face was turning red, I didn't know what to do! Well, when it got up to 16 [dollars]--now that's a fact, there's four, five six's coming up before the seven --I said, "Excuse me, professor." And I grabbed those 16 bucks. He said, "I thought you wasn't playing." "I wasn't playing [until] I got that high!" (Laughter)

We used to have a lot of experiences there. We had had an old mine in the back of the school there. We had a shaft and a tunnel. We'd go practice drilling and dynamiting there.

M: Right in the school grounds, eh?

V: In the back of the school grounds, I'd say about a half a mile. Then we took a few field trips. One of them was over here at White Oaks, New Mexico. We went there for a month with Professor Seamon, who was professor of Geology at the time; very fine man. We used to play a lot of chess together over there when we weren't doing any surveying and geology work. It's a ghost town now.

M: What was your major?

V: Mining. That's the only thing we majored in.

M: That was the only major they had back then.

V: See, that was my trouble. I didn't have the money to go any other place. The only college they had was the School of Mines. So that was the only logical place to go and the only profession to take.

M: After you graduated in 1922, what did you do?

V: Well, the first job I had was in United Verde Copper Company in Arizona. I had that job for a couple of years. Then mining got a little tiresome, I wanted a little bit more activity. So I went to Detroit, and then I was employed there as an engineer for the Gas Company, field engineer. We used to run 36-inch gas mains up to the River _____ plant in Detroit. After two years, I took a vacation, coming back to El Paso. While I was in El Paso, I met this lady here, [my wife], on a very casual visit to my brother. Her sister happened to be in my brother's home at the time. I was here for one week vacation. So her sister invited me to her house, across the street from my brother's. I met her. So then instead of going to Detroit, I decided to take a job which was open at El Tigre, Sonora, about 90 miles south of Douglas, Arizona, as a mining engineer. So I went down to El Tigre, Sonora. There is where I met Fred Bailey, he was superintendent at the time. About three months later, I came back and married this girl. She's been with me 50 years. We celebrated our 50th anniversary last May. Our son, who is a priest, Father Robert Villegas, who is now the pastor of San Jose Church in La Mesa, [New Mexico], he married us, and we had a little blow out at the Country Club. Fifty years of marriage with this same gal which I only courted a week!

So I stayed in El Tigre about four or five years; and that brought me up to around 1930. At that time, I came to El Paso for a little vacation, and I had a ruptured appendix. So that sent me to the hospital for three

months. At that time, antibiotics and those drugs were unknown. So all they could do was keep that wound open and probe it every year take out the pus pockets and break them up. So after three months I was out of the hospital. But meanwhile, the Depression was pretty hot. Everything that I earned in El Tigre and I had saved in building and loans in Phoenix and in Inter-Mountain Building and Loan in Salt Lake City, all that was wiped out completely. So I was here in the hospital, came out of the hospital almost dead broke. That's what the Depression did to not only to me, but to thousands and thousands of people. So that was a pretty bad era for us. [We] went to live with my wife's parents for a while, and then I decided to go and live in Juarez, which was a little bit cheaper. So I established a chain of exchange houses in Juarez. At that time there was no paper money. So I used to come over here and buy the silver from the stores--Popular and Given Brothers and all of them. I had three exchange houses, but the main [one] of them was right at the entrance of the old market house; pretty good business. All these people, you'd go down there and buy their silver before they went to the market. There was only a quarter of a cent or sometimes half a cent profit on each dollar. That's when the fluctuation came in. It was two [pesos] for one [dollar] up to that time, and then it started floating up and down; you never did know what the legitimate price would be for that day. But I had a nephew that worked for the bank in Juarez who'd tip me off. He later became a big shot in the banking business in Mexico, President of the National Bankers Association and also President of the Banco Nacional for all the branches, Ladislado Lopez Negrete. So that kept me going in Juarez.

My sister had a store in Juarez called the La Sorpresa, right across

from the little plaza in Juarez. And I lived on the second floor of the Sorpresa, her store. She used to let me have that place there while I was in Juarez. She was doing pretty good business down below, and I used to live upstairs. So we stayed there for a couple of years until my health got a little bit better. But still I didn't know what to do--whether to go back to mining [or what]. My father-in-law happened to be an optometrist. He had his office on South El Paso Street. He used to practice in Mexico; then he came here before the profession was regulated, so he could practice without any difficulties. He told me once, "Why don't you go ahead and study optometry? You're a little weak yet to go back into mining. All you need is an arm and an eye." (Chuckles) So I took him up. From there I went to the Los Angeles School of Optometry, which was on the campus of the University of Southern California. I stood there one year and then I heard from my father-in-law. Dr. Horton, who was the President of the Southern College of Optometrists in Memphis, had written to him asking for somebody that was in school and wanted to go to school over there [to] translate some books for him. So my father communicated with me in Los Angeles. So at the end of the semester, I transferred back to Southern College of Optometry. And there I was setting pretty for the Depression. I was making \$100 a month, which is very good money, plus board and room and tuition. I taught two classes, Physiological Optics and Physics for my money. My wife didn't like Memphis too well so she came back to El Paso with the children. So I stayed there two years. At the end of two years, Fred Bailey writes me and he says, "Villegas, we've been looking for you for a long, long time, and finally I found out that you was over there studying. We have a very good job for you in the state of Guerrero,

with the Pinales Mining Company." So at that time, I didn't know what to do really. I asked my wife over the phone if she wanted me to go to mining for a while, to pick up a little money. She says, "Okay." So I broke the optometry schooling. At the end of the semester I went back to Sudiana, Guerrero, where Bailey was. I was there three and a half years. By that time I had a little bank roll again. So I came to El Paso, bought a home, then came back to the college. In a year and a half I finished over there.

M: Finished optometry school.

V: Finished optometry. Came back here and opened up my office at 120 S. Mesa. In the year of 1955, my son came. See, I have a son that is a Doctor of Optometry; the priest is a Doctor of Optometry, too. By the way, he was a graduate of Notre Dame, then he went for four years in the Gregorian University in Rome. He came back and studied at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. for two years. He was ready for his doctorate when he decided to come and help the Mexican people here. He had to write a big theme, you know, doctorate, about two years' work. So he decided he wouldn't take the time; so he has his Master's, naturally, in Theology. He came to El Paso; he wanted to be near his own people, the Mexican people. So he asked Bishop Metzger that he wanted a one-man parish; if he could do that, why, he'd stay in El Paso and help him out. So he established a church in La Mesa, New Mexico, where he still is. He just left here a little bit before you came. My other son, who is an optometrist, he came and we both established the Franklin Optical Company in 1955. We had that for about six years and we sold out when I retired. He opened some optometry offices in Mexico, about seven of them. He still has one in Juarez, and the Ultracent.

That's his. And the Ultra Optical.

M: When did you set up your office here in El Paso?

V: 1938 or 1939.

M: Let me back track a little bit and ask you about what you recall of the Prohibition years. That was an interesting period here in El Paso.

V: Yes; well, a lot of smuggling actually. Don Antonio Bermudez, who is part of my in-laws and relations... My sister married a cousin of Antonio Bermudez. His name was Abelino Bermudez. He established the first drug store in Juarez, by the way--Farmacia Central. As I say, he was related to them, so he was very close to them, Don Antonio and Octavio Bermudez. Antonio Bermudez was sort of comptroller for the distillery here in Juarez. (I think it's the American or the Waterfill, one of the two.) Then these people decided to pass over the business [to] him, if he had some people to help him out with the capital. So they bought out the distillery. And it so happened that just about that time Prohibition came in. That was a godsend. They had gangs, 40 or 50 of them at the brewery every day, picking up the boxes of liquor. There used to be a place in Cordova called the Hole on the Wall; that is where they used to go through. That went in into the interior or Mexico. Even in Franklin Roosevelt's parties they had [liquor]. I saw that the other day [on television] when they had the story of Franklin [Roosevelt] and his wife. They were having a party there and one of them cracked, they said it was during Prohibition. So I think it was coming from [Juarez]. (Laughs) I picked that up during that TV [show].

So there was a lot of shootings, naturally--border patrolmen, some of them got shot, a lot of the smugglers got shot. It was quite a big business. So Don Antonio later on became mayor of Juarez; that was his first political job.

Then he became treasurer of the State of Chihuahua. Then he went to Mexico and he became head of Petroleos. My nephew was his personal doctor in Mexico City, Armando Porras. And, well, that's about all, all these shootings.

M: Do you have any interesting stories to tell about Mr. Bermudez and his operations?

V: Well, I wouldn't go into that too much. (Laughter)

M: I interviewed him in Mexico City in 1974. A very interesting man.

V: Oh, a very fine man. I remember in Juarez, before they got up too high, they had a place right near my brother-in-law's drugstore, the Farmacia Central. They had a little place there with a long counter, not painted or anything, just raw timber. There is where he used to sell a lot of liquor.

M: Was there any concern on his part that that liquor would come to the United States illegally?

V: Oh, no; he was making money out of it. No concern at all. He didn't get involved personally, but he had a lot of people that he sold the liquor to.

M: And it was their business, what they wanted to do with it.

V: Yeah. It was quite a prosperous business too at the time.

M: Well, it always has been, actually. Do you recall any interesting or unusual experiences that happened to you or that you observed during Prohibition, visiting Juarez? Juarez was quite a lively place then.

V: Oh, yes. Juarez probably furnished all the entertainment for El Paso, because El Paso was dead; no liquor. So we had a lot of places there, very important at the time, [like] the Central Cafe. The Central Cafe was known all over the United States. It was run by Severo Gonzalez. Movie actors and VIPs from all over the country used to go there. They served besides liquor

very fine food. They served venison; that was their speciality, until the government prohibited the sale of venison in restaurants. Later on he moved down on Juarez Avenue. He first had his place at the corner of Lerdo and 16 de Septiembre. He was also interested in sports, boxing. He promoted a lot of boxing events here in El Paso. Then we had the Mint Cafe, which is owned by Harry Mitchell. Harry Mitchell later on became the owner of the El Paso Brewery. Then we had the Big Kid Cafe, also on 16th of September. He promoted it because he advertised the longest bar in the world.

M: How long was it?

V: Well, more than a block, almost to the end of the other street.

M: A whole block?

V: At least a couple hundred feet. And old Big Kid was about 350 pounds; that's why they called him Big Kid. And they had tables all around there and we sat there and drank beer and enjoyed the music, orchestras and so forth. A nice place. Then we had the Lobby. The Lobby No. 2 was a very fine place to go with your family at the time. They had Vaudeville, singers and dancers and so forth, and very nice people went there. Very good drinks, not adulterated. Then we had the Tivoli, which was right at the bridge before you cross on Juarez Avenue, on the right side coming to El Paso. Now before, that was a very fine night club, too. Later on it became a gambling hall. That's the location of that incident I was telling you about [concerning Cap Kidd and myself]. That place was owned by Salvador Ateca, the same man that had that participation in the Revolution, that took his money to Canada. He owned the place and he ran that.

So there was a lot of entertainment in Juarez at that time. The red light district was there, wide open -- Calle del Diablo. Before it moved to

the other place it was Calle del Diablo. It paralleled the 16th of September. It's just one block north of the main plaza. Originally this red light district was in El Paso. That was located at, they used to call it San Jacinto Street. San Jacinto Street was the first district they had here in El Paso, completely under the law. Then some mayor decided it was too centrally located. So they changed it over to 11th Street, 11th and Stanton, around there, where all those tenements are now. Later on that was obliterated and all these girls moved over to Juarez at the Calle del Diablo. That continued there until it went down to Mariscal Street. I don't know whether it's still there or not.

M: It's still there.

V: So there was a lot of entertainment there at that time. Juarez really was the focus of all the entertainment; El Paso was dead.

M: Did you know Ulises Irigoyen?

V: Yes. Ulises Irigoyen was quite an educator here. He ran the Palmore College, which was situated on Upson Street, one of the finest colleges here in El Paso for commercial courses. Don Antonio Bermudez graduated from there, by the way. My nephew, who became that banker I was telling you about, he also took a course there. You know the Ponces, alderman here in El Paso? His sister graduated from there. A lot of prominent people graduated from that college because it was first-rate. Ulises was a very strict professor, very clean living man. Probably you have heard about him through Don Antonio. Did he tell you about that?

M: Yes, and I've read some of the things Irigoyen has written about the Zona Libre. Do you remember any of the activities that he was involved in concerning la Zona Libre?

V: Never had been a Zona Libre here.

M: Well, he wanted to make it into a Zona Libre.

V: It never did come in. I don't know nothing about that. He was quite a man.

[Pause]

M: Dr. Villegas, I want to ask you about the Depression years here in El Paso, what you remember.

V: Well, it was very, very tough. As you know, the banks closed. I lost all my savings of five years in mining, which is why I remember it so well. Besides, at the time, I was a sick man, because I had that operation. I was three months in the hospital. Some of the most prominent people here in El Paso were completely broke. There were no jobs. I couldn't get a job in mining; even if I had been healthy, I couldn't have. That's why I went to Juarez and established those money exchange companies. A lot of the stores were closed, property went down to nothing. A lot of people just to keep their homes intact, they gave their homes free. People couldn't pay the rents.

M: What was the impact of the Depression on the Mexican American community locally? I understand a lot of people were deported back to Mexico.

V: Well, Mexico was a little bit better off than we were. Mexican people don't suffer a lot because they have a lower standard of living. See, a Mexican can get along very easily with just a little corn and frijoles, as you know; while the American, he's used to ham and eggs and beef and beefsteaks, and all that business. So the Mexican was more or less adjusted because their standard of living did not change so awful much. If you had, say, a professional man that was struck down to nothing, he was having trouble; but the Mexican fellow, his standard of living was rather low to

start out with, so a little notch or two below that didn't hurt so much. But Juarez was much better off than we were. The big advantage of the Depression was the fact that things were very, very cheap and reasonable. You could go out there with 50 cents and have enough food for a whole day. Vegetables were nothing; you'd go to Juarez and buy meat for 10 cents a kilo. [You could] buy beer for a nickel a bottle, which is very important. (Chuckles) Everything was completely down to nothing, that was the tremendous benefit that the Depression had at the time. Now we have inflation, with more or less partial depression, which is a very big difference. A man that made a couple of dollars a day, he was in heaven at that time. Anybody that had a job like a mail clerk, or any federal job, or over at Fort Bliss, they were in heaven. They didn't lose their jobs, they had their money coming every month. Houses were down to nothing. You could buy a darn good home for \$1500 or \$2000; you couldn't buy it for \$15,000 right now.

M: I understand that many Mexican Americans left El Paso and went back to Mexico. Well, in your own case, you went to Juarez. But there was some pressure exerted on the Mexican American community to repatriate a lot of people. Did you know any families who were repatriated?

V: No, I went there voluntarily. I don't remember anybody that was repatriated, at least where we lived, which were established neighborhoods, nobody. Maybe down in Chihuahita and those barrios over there, on Santa Fe [Street] and all those places, maybe so, I don't know. But people lived much better in Juarez at that time than we did here, 'cause things were very cheap.

M: I understand a lot of people from El Paso went to Juarez to shop.

V: Oh, gosh, yes. They still do.

M: I've read in the newspapers where sometimes they had trouble bringing that

merchandise across the river, across the bridge.

V: Certain items probably, like maybe fruit. But almost everything was permitted.

M: You don't remember having any problems yourself crossing with merchandise?

V: Never, never. You could bring anything you wanted to-- meat, groceries, produce--anything.

M: Now what about during the Prohibition years when there was pressure to close the bridge at an early hour to prevent Americans from gambling in Juarez? Did you ever encounter any problems yourself with that?

V: Well, there were several times where the bridge was closed early. I suppose it was because of gambling, I don't remember exactly. But they closed it at 10:00; you had to get over fast. A lot of them stayed over there; couldn't make it! (Laughter)

M: Did you ever get caught?

V: No, [not at that time]. I got caught once. See, we had an optical company in Juarez, the Franklin Optical also in Juarez. And when Kennedy was assassinated, I happened to be over there, and they closed the bridges because they wanted to see if they couldn't catch the assassins going over to Mexico. So the bridges were closed for two days. Naturally there was no problem for me; I went over to my sister's house and stayed there with them. But that time the bridge was actually closed, both ways.

M: How did World War II affect your family?

V: World War II, no.

M: Didn't affect your family at all?

V: Well, naturally I had a brother that went overseas, George; he got wounded over there once. (He was a reporter for Pancho Villa.) Then I had another brother that went into the Navy in 1918, and he served 34 years in the Navy.

He's retired and living in Phoenix now. So we all served during the war.

M: I want to ask you a question about the peso devaluation. Since you had businesses in Juarez, that must have affected you. There were devaluations in the 1930s, a fluctuation of the peso. Then in 1948 there was one, in 1954 there was one, and of course we've had one just recently. How were you affected by all these devaluations?

V: No, I dealt mostly in dollars. I converted my money every day. I'd buy silver here and sell it for dollars, come back up here and buy some more silver and sell it for dollars. That didn't affect me one bit. And the devaluations were not too severe, see. The suddenness of these devaluations were the ones that were being affected. At that time, it varied a quarter of a cent, a cent, or some more; but it stayed stable for years and years and years. The second devaluation, which brought it down I think to \$12.50, that came all of a sudden, too. That caught a lot of people unawares. Like this last devaluation, it caught a lot of people unawares.

M: Dr. Villegas, when you were a little boy, did you ever hear the word "chicano?"

V: Yes.

M: How was it used then?

V: Well, the word chicano was more or less derogatory. We referred as a chicano a little lower class of Mexican that lived around Chihuahueta and those places there. Chihuahueta was around Sante Fe and Chihuahua Street. But they've changed it quite a lot now. It doesn't have the stigma that it originally had when I was a kid.

M: Did the stigma have to do with the social standing of the person, would you say?

- V: Still, I can't get it away from my mind because that's the way I understood it at the time and that's the way everybody understood it at the time. When you said "chicano," that was derogatory; but now it's changed.
- M: I would like to ask you your opinion of the Chicano Movement.
- V: Well, I think it's very good. They're giving the Mexican people a little chance there, you know, more education. Take UTEP for instance. When I was there, as you know, I was the only Mexican in my graduating class. I was the only Mexican almost in [my] high school graduating class. In San Jacinto, also. But now you have more than half of the schools in El Paso that are fully Mexican. You have high schools [that are] 50/50. El Paso High is mostly Mexican. UTEP is mostly Mexican. So it has worked a little bit towards the betterment, educationally, of the Mexican people.
- M: So you have a positive view of the Chicano Movement?
- V: Well, yes and no; sometimes they overdo it. Like all these manifestations they have there in the streets, and trying to reclaim all this property of Colorado and Utah and New Mexico and Arizona back to Mexico--that's a little bit too farfetched. But as long as they stick to the American way of living and trying to get ahead... In the environment that this nation furnishes, anybody can get ahead here if he wants to; you know that. I know it from my own personal experiences. But when they try to overthrow the government like some of these parades and demonstrations and so forth, I am opposed to it, naturally.
- M: I've collected statistics on the level of representation of Mexican Americans locally in El Paso since 1900, and until very recently very few Mexican Americans held positions of responsibility in the government, in education, and in business. How do you explain the very slow rate of progress in the Mexican American community?

V: Well, I think it's due mostly to the Mexican itself. They've lived more or less segregated, they have their own social customs, they haven't mingled too far out. Probably they have been discriminated and maybe they are afraid of that discrimination to get out and really work for something. As I say, I never was discriminated in my life. I never ran for any kind of office of any kind. But now, it's a little bit better, I believe. We're getting a lot of public officials that are Mexican, we had a mayor here, two-term mayor. His brother is still in the City Council. We have several councilmen on the City Council, several commissioners. We have governors from two states, Arizona and New Mexico. New Mexico is way ahead of us in that sense, because most of the public officials are Mexicans, from the governor down.

M: Were you ever involved in community activities, community organizations, political activities?

V: Never. [I'm] no politician.

M: What is your opinion about illegal aliens and the situation we have here in the border?

V: Well, there's a lot of different opinions about it. I wouldn't mind all these illegal aliens to be legalized if there was a way to control the incoming ones. What's the use of legalizing all these aliens, when in about 10 years you'll have another eight or 10 million of illegal aliens. You can't stop that; it's impossible. That border's 3500 miles long. They seep in through everyplace. If they were only to maintain status quo as it is now, I would be for it, because these people need help. But economically, we cannot support all of Mexico, and that's what would happen eventually. With the birth [rate] over there--there's no birth control at all--Mexico is growing [by] leaps and bounds in population. They have to have something to eat.

The United States can't furnish all. So if there was a way to control the status quo I'd be for it, but that wouldn't help. We'd have another eight million coming here.

M: Do you have something else that you would like to add that we haven't talked about before?

V: Well, I had a few notes here. Let me see.

[Pause]

In my boyhood we had streetcars. There was no automobiles to amount to anything yet; they all were horse-drawn carriages. We had about four or five street car lines: one to Highland Park, one to Fort Bliss, one to Washington Park, and one to Sunset Heights, and the Second Ward that went around Seventh Street to Park and came back on St. Vrain back to the Pioneer Plaza. Then we had jitneys; that was a big economical way of travel then. The jitneys were mostly Model T's. You paid a nickel, got on them; they were all over town. You could go anyplace on them. Then we had the Inter-Urban; that ran over to Ysleta, and they had two or three stations on the way down. I remember one station in particular, Franklin. We used to go hunting [there]. I'd take a shotgun and [my] lunch and stop at Franklin, about three miles this side of Ysleta, and go north to the hills there for jackrabbits, cottontail, and quail. Then we had the old Tobin Place, that was an engine that used to run to where the Sunrise Shopping Center is here on Dyer. All that was vacant. That was Tobin Place, and this fellow ran that place to sell lots. My sisters bought a few of them for \$5 a lot. And now, imagine! So that was the transportation end of that.

No immigration problems when I was a child. You used to go back and forth across that bridge, no inspection; there might be an inspection there,

but they never did say anything. Back and forth anytime you wanted to. So there was no trouble at all, no inspection of any kind.

Now the Chinese colony, that was located on Oregon Street. All these Chinamen used to line up [on] the curb there at around sunset. [They would] bring out their chairs and sit on those chairs and smoke their long pipes with their pigtails hanging towards the street. We kids used to ride on our bicycles and pull some of them! (Laughter) They had two blocks of Chinese, south of Overland on Oregon; they had their church there. And then when we had the Osaple Parade (Osaple is El Paso spelled backwards; that is the origin of the Sun Carnival), that parade, the Chinese used to take a very active part in it, too. They had the dragon about 100 feet long, smoking through the mouth and curling back and forth all around the main streets of El Paso. It was quite a prominent colony. Now [in] those places, they had little shops, all these Chinese, and they sold fireworks. That was the only place where you could buy fireworks for the Fourth of July and any other occasion. They always had stock of them, all kinds of them. They also sold litchi nuts and silk gowns and so forth for the women. There's where they made their money. And they also had very good restaurants in town, but they lived over there on South Oregon. Gradually they disappeared.

M: What happened to them?

V: Well, the old timers probably died and their sons, which were more intelligent, they went to college and so forth, moved to California, so there are very few Chinese left.

We used to have band concerts at Cleveland Square. We had military bands and municipal bands there. A lot of people attended them, very

prominent, because we didn't have any TV or radio or anything else. In Juarez we also had those band concerts in the little plaza in front of the church, and we had military bands and municipal bands also. They had the Mexican style serenata, boys going around in one direction and the girls in the other, flirting as they went by.

The Rio Grande was quite a river then. They hadn't built these dams yet, so we had a few floods once in a while during the rainy seasons, and that was quite a river sometimes. That was our main sport, you know. I used to live about eight blocks from the river. We used to go down there [during] vacation time every day, take a swim or two or three, and then we'd go down the Stanton Street Bridge and ride the waves. Those waves were pretty high, two feet, three feet, float down the waves way back to St. Vrain Street. That was the old Rio Grande.

M: How deep would it get?

V: Oh, my God, some of those places, why... A lot of people drowned there, you know, that didn't know how to swim. Some places it was probably 10, 15 feet deep.

M: Were you a pretty good swimmer?

V: Well, there's where I learned, in the Rio Grande. One time we made a raft and we decided we were going to put that raft on the Rio Grande and float down to Ysleta. So we came to the Texas and Pacific Railroad yards, which was located around First Street and St. Vrain. We took some ties from there, put some planks on it, and about 10 of us dragged it down to the river. We pushed it in the river, and the whole thing sank.

M: It was too heavy, eh?

V: That was it. We were trying to imitate Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer; they

were the ones that gave us the idea, but it didn't come through!

M: Were there other kids who were successful in building a raft?

V: Oh, no; we were the first ones that attempted it. (Chuckles) See, the old Rio Grande had a wooden bridge there; that was all there [was] to it. The other bridge came in later. So this first bridge was going back and forth, sometimes the river was dry and we used to go on the bicycle back across the river bank instead of paying two cents for the bridge toll. Then I used to take music lessons from a lady by the name of Luz Vargas. I'd go on my bicycle down the Acequia Madre, which is that little ditch, down to what they used to call the Partidos (that's located where the agricultural college [in Juarez] is now), and ride back. And the old teacher used to come back in her carriage to my house on St. Vrain to give me music lessons.

The old M.D.'s and doctors used to use carriages. When a carriage with a doctor used to stop in there, all the neighborhood would come out and see who was going to die. Hospitals, there was no need for hospitals at that time. Everybody that was sick, they died at home if they died, or they were cured at home. Doctor Samaniego, a prominent doctor you've probably heard of, he used to come around there. Dr. Rodarte, the father of these other doctors, he used to come around there [in his carriage]. No trouble at all getting a house call. Dr. Schuster was over there on Prospect Street, where the Providence Hospital originated, the father of all these other Dr. Schusters. One time on the Fourth of July I got my arm hurt with a cannon I was making. I went down to him. He picked out all the little powder marks on the arm, gave me a tetanus shot, and charged me one dollar. That's the kind of a difference there is now to go to a hospital and come out of there with a \$3,000 dollar bill. So there is a big difference, you

know, in everything.

Now, when I used to deliver papers, one of the sections that I used to deliver on was around Cotton [Street] going towards Southwest Hospital. All those places were tuberculosis sanitariums. I used to deliver papers to all those places. They had big screens on the porches, and all these people used to sleep there. El Paso was noted at the time for being a good cure for tuberculosis because of the dry climate and the fresh air. But that disappeared; [it] was proven that the climate didn't have much to do with it. Maybe you have heard about that, too.

Going to Elephant Butte Dam was quite a little trip at the time, about 1910. We had an old Briscoe car. Briscoe was called the Million Dollar Car. They only made a few of them. So we started a trip down to Elephant Butte Dam. We had that odometer that shows the distances. You start out at 0 and measure out all the little places--the curves, [the] amount of mileage. It was all the unpaved, right down to Elephant Butte Dam. So the transportation was not too hot at that time, like it is now on freeways.

I think that's about all; I think you've had enough.

M: I have one more question regarding this community in the Rim Road area, Stormsville. Do you remember about that Mexican community up there?

V: Yes. I remember that it was up there, little shacks on the very rim. And I remember when Kern bought it over, and he put that big old arch there, you know. That was quite a deal there. I never did understand it, but it had all sort of hieroglyphics there--zodiacs and everything. That was the entrance to it. He sold a lot of property there. And that became Kern Place, and then later on Rim Road.

M: What happened to the Mexican families when that was done?

V: They came and lived in El Paso someplace; Second Ward, I don't know.

M: Well, Dr. Villegas, we want to thank you very much for giving us your time.

It's been a very interesting and stimulating talk.

V: I hope it's been of interest.