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Interview no. 426

Alice B. Cummings

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Alice B. Cummings (1905-)
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 1, 1978
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 426
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 426
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

(Retired teacher)

Born in Van Horn, Texas, in 1905; attended Brackenridge High School in San Antonio, Westmoreland Junior College in San Antonio (now Trinity University), and Sul Ross Junior College (now Sul Ross University) in Alpine; attended the College of Mines (now UTEP) where she received her B.A. and master's degree; taught at Alamo School for 30 years.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Early life in Van Horn; supposed murder of her father for homesteading in the Green River area; Pascual Orozco's body at Van Horn; Anglo American attitudes toward Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution; reflections on teaching at Alamo School in El Paso (predominantly Mexican American) from the 1940s to the 1970s; Anglo/Mexican relations.

Length of Interview: 30 minutes Length of Transcript: 31 pages

Alice Cummings
by Richard Estrada
March 1, 1978

E: Mrs. Cummings, can you give me your full name, please?

C: My name is Alice B. Sowell Cummings.

E: Where were you born, Mrs. Cummings?

C: In Van Horn, Texas.

E: Could you tell me something about your parents?

C: My father and mother came to Van Horn in 1903, and I was born in 1905. And my father was killed, supposedly by hired killers, in 1906, in October.

E: What was your father's full name?

C: George O'Neal Sowell.

E: And your mother?

C: Her name was Maddy Bird Sowell, later Jackson.

E: Where was your father from originally?

C: His people were from Tennessee. But he came from around Sonora and Ozona. That's where he came from.

E: In Texas.

C: Yes, in Texas.

E: What had your father's people **done** back in Tennessee? Do you know?

C: No, I don't. They moved, you know, west, with the movement.

E: How about your mother's family?

C: Well, we are related to the Virginia Birds. And after the Civil War, many of the Birds moved to Texas. Those that had drifted south into Mississippi and Louisiana came to Texas, because it seemed to be the least ravaged of all the other places. And they were planters at the time of the Civil War. As they came to Texas they did diverse things. Some of them moved to Dallas and became financiers, I understand. Not that I know anything about those, except what I hear. But my grandfather became a sheep rancher in the Ozona

country, and he was a founder of that town. And his name is on the corner-stone of the bank, and maybe the courthouse, I'm not sure.

E: In Ozona?

C: [Yes.]

E: So, you say you're distantly related to Senator Bird of Virginia?

C: Yes, I would say so. Cousins-like, because our fathers began to separate back in 1797. And as a matter of fact, my great grandfather was born in 1797.

E: In Virginia?

C: In Virginia. No, not Virginia, I'm sorry--in South Carolina. He was the grandson of William Bird III.

E: Where in South Carolina?

C: I don't know. And then he moved to Mississippi and married Priscilla Jenkins.

E: You mentioned a while ago that your father had been killed perhaps by hired assassins.

C: Yes.

E: Do you know anything else about the circumstances surrounding this incident?

C: This is what, you know...I've read lately the [book] Centennial, and I began to get a picture of what went on back in there. Of course, that was in Colorado that it happened.

E: What happened in Colorado?

C: Well, the big land owners, supposedly British in that [book], I believe, had the whole country for their cattle. And if anybody came in and took up a homestead, why, they were just killed to get rid of them, you know. And my father had laid a claim down in the Big Bend, in what's called Green River; I mean a homestead. And the rule in those days was that in order to keep

your homestead, you had to go there once a month, and had to improve it--you had to live on it and improve it, you see. So, once a month he would go and it would take him a day to get there, and he would stay there a day. And he had a shad of a barn and a well. Then the third day he would come back. Well, on the fourth day, he didn't return. And the fifth day, they went to find him, and they found only bones and other things that he could be identified, you know--his boots, things he had in his pocket, and his teeth, and such as that.

E: This was only after five days?

C: Yes, because the varmints ate him, you see.

E: Yes.

C: That was very evident that they had [done that] and there was no trace of... you could find no trace of any bullet or any kind of foul play. And he was an excellent horseman, so that rather ruled out that he would have been thrown, or on a gentle horse, besides, you know. So then my mother's father, Ben Bird, from Ozona, came and built her a hotel. And she ran this hotel for...well, all of her life she stayed there.

E: In what city?

C: Van Horn.

E: In Van Horn.

C: Yes. Van Horn was in El Paso County at the time I was born, but it became Culberson in 1911.

E: Did you tell us a little while ago the date of your birth?

C: November the 6th, 1905.

E: 1905. As a young girl when you were growing up, do you have recollections of your school years there in Van Horn?

- C: Yes, I was there until I was 12, and then I went to San Antonio.
- E: How many students were there in the school that you were going to?
- C: Oh, there might've been 50. Never more than 60 or 62, at that time. That's all grades.
- E: What kind of ethnic composition was there in that group?
- C: There were Americans, but then they were Mexicans.
- E: Of Mexican descent?
- C: Yes. And one family--not a family, just a man and his wife--Negro. Otherwise, they were Anglos.
- E: Do you have any idea, perhaps, of what portion of the school population was Mexican?
- C: At that time the Mexicans were segregated. They had their own school and they were taught by Anglo teachers. But then they had, in their own part of town, they had their [own school].
- E: What part of town was that, more or less?
- C: South.
- E: And did the Black children go to school?
- C: There were none. I just told you that it was an old man and his wife.
- E: But they didn't have any children.
- C: They had no children. So there were never, while I lived there, any Negro children, and I think there never have been. There have been adults, you know, there from time to time--going through, you might say, because there're none that live there.
- E: Do you think that was out of choice or was there a rule?
- C: No, no. As these went through my mother's place there, they would stop to work, and she gave them work all the time. And they'd stay as long as they

would, but they never wanted to because there weren't any other Negroes there. It seemed that to me. I used to visit...Aunt Lila was the one Negro there, you know. And I used to go down, I was very fascinated with the way that she cooked potatoes and the chickens. And just...I liked her, you know.

E: Do you have any idea where she was from?

C: Haven't any idea. They called themselves Freeman. So I just suppose they took their name as "free man," you know, as Lila and Calvin Freeman.

E: Do you suspect that they were ex-slaves?

C: Yes, I'm sure, they were most likely the children of slaves, had come from slavery.

E: Did you ever witness or hear about any incidents of violence between the different ethnic groups there, say between the Mexicans and the Anglos?

C: Not any. We got along very well. There was a , you know, a difference. Just like that if we needed something that they could do... And they had the Catholic Church. But if we needed them, my mother would say, "Go to Mexican Town and go and see if you can find _____," or whatever that she wanted to do. They were diversified, they had their own stores. And whenever we needed music, we asked them to play for our dances and they played a guitar and violin and sometimes a clarinet. And we have danced many miles to that. Personally, there was not any...they were respected people. But there was that, you know...it wasn't any feeling, it was just fact. And I lived across the valley from some Mexican children, and I was very fascinated with their creativeness in making doll houses--girls they were, did that--and cookies, their kind of cookies. (Chuckles)

E: What was the occasion of your going to San Antonio?

- C: Well, I think my mother was always interested greatly in education. If somebody came to Van Horn that could teach...we called it Elocution at the time, or Music--piano--she always saw that we got the advantage of their teaching. And Van Horn, they taught children as fast as they could go. Well, at 12, and I was going to be 13 in November, I was ready for high school. And she felt like...well, most of those that were able to go were sent away. And I went to my aunt who lived in San Antonio. My brother and I, we went to Brackenridge High and graduated from there. And it's still very, very...one of their best schools.
- E: More or less what years were you in San Antonio?
- C: I graduated in 1921. So, I guess I was there three years. I graduated in three years.
- E: 1919, you got there?
- C: Yes. So, we have to count back, I'm not a good mathematician at this point. (Chuckles)
- E: There at Brackenridge, could you tell me more or less what the ethnic composition of that high school was?
- C: Well, there were all kinds, I think. We didn't notice any orientals, but there were Negroes and Mexicans and Anglos.
- E: So, that school was integrated?
- C: Yes, it was, at that time.
- E: This is somewhat unusual, isn't it, for that time in Texas?
- C: Yes. Well, I never thought anything about it, you know, at the time. And there were not a lot of them. I think they just didn't go to school, you know, is what I think. But there were a few of the Blacks, and Mexicans went. I never could tell any different, myself.

- E: Did you know of any high schools in San Antonio that were exclusively Black or exclusively Mexican or exclusively white?
- C: No, I didn't. There were a good many schools there, a great many Catholic schools, and still are. And I went to a junior college there called Westmoreland but it was parochial, Methodist.
- E: Now, when you were attending high school there, did you ever witness or feel any abrasions between these ethnic groups?
- C: Not a bit. We had the most excellent...and I think it's still so, that Brackenridge High School, of any in the whole United States, their discipline, the way that they went, they just fell into it. They had good school spirit. And when we came out we kept to the right. And no, it was a happy time.
- E: Did you ever witness any inter-racial dating or inter-ethnic dating at that time?
- C: No, I didn't.
- E: Each group kept pretty much to itself?
- C: Yes, I guess they did. I just didn't pay any attention to it, you know. And there was no problem, as far as I know.
- E: So, after you finished high school, you went to junior college.
- C: Yes.
- E: At Westmoreland, you say?
- C: Westmoreland. It's now Trinity University. But at that time it was Westmoreland College.
- E: How long were you there?
- C: Two years. Then I went to Sul Ross another year, but it was a junior college at that time. But I wanted this permanent certificate in teaching, which I got there a year and a summer. And then I taught two years, then I married.

And for ten years or more I didn't teach. Then I went back to school at College of Mines, at the time. And got my B.A. in '46. And in '50 I got a masters degree.

E: After you married, did you always live in El Paso?

C: No. We lived first a little while in Van Horn, then we lived a little while in Alpine, Texas. And then we lived in Balmorhea, Texas, several years, and then in Pecos some years. Then we moved back to Van Horn for two years, then we moved here in '42.

E: What brought you to El Paso in '42?

C: Well, the War. We were in a filling station and court there in Van Horn. And the War threw a cartwheel in that, you know. So, then my husband came up here with the El Paso City Lines. It wasn't City Lines, it was El Paso Electric Company at the time. And he was there as long as he was able. Then when he was no longer able to, he was supervisor of the lines. And they said he had arterial sclerosis and that he might black out at any time. So, he took a job at the Popular in the Men's Department.

E: So he worked for the Schwartz family. Aren't they the ones that owned the Popular?

C: Schwartz, yes. Yes, he worked there for several years and then he retired. And didn't live...he died in '64.

E: Where were you in 1915?

C: In Van Horn.

E: Now, let's see, you were born in 1905.

C: Yes.

E: And you lived in Van Horn until about 1919.

C: Yes, I did.

- E: Therefore, as a young girl, you must've heard some things related to border raids and the Mexican Revolution.
- C: Yes, I did. In fact, we lived in fear. This is the main thing I remember, is the great fear and dread that we had of the things that went on. They never came to Van Horn, but we'd go to bed at night without lights because we were afraid that lights might attract them or that they could find the place. And it was a very small town.
- E: What was the general feeling as to which faction was responsible for these border raids?
- C: Well, everybody /said/ Pancho Villa, you know. Of course, he was the big name. And of course, he was responsible for all the dread and terror that we experienced. And to me he is not a hero. And anybody that says he is, I have a great feeling of doubt. And if he did any lasting good, I've never been able to see it; but then of course, that's my lasting feeling.
- E: What do you base these feelings upon? Upon your experiences as a young girl?
- C: Yes. Read that little thing right there.
- E: Okay.
- C: Mrs. D.B. Jackson, that was my mother. You want to turn that off a minute?
- E: Okay, I'll turn it off.

/PAUSE/

- E: The article to which Mrs. Cummings makes reference is taken from the West Texas Times, Thursday, March 4, 1976. The West Texas Times is published in Van Horn. The pertinent section of the article says, and I quote:

In the days of Pancho Villa's raids, Van Horn had its anxious moments. Reports of Villa's whereabouts came in to Van Horn by telegraph at the T and P depot. A report came over the wires that Van Horn was to be raided. The men of the town gathered guns and ammunition to defend the town.

That night Mrs. Jackson stood on her north porch about 2:00 a.m. with her two small daughters clinging to her skirts to watch for anyone who might come in from the south. A lone rider came in from the south on horseback. Mrs. Jackson called out, "Who goes there?" She had no weapon of any kind to defend herself. A Mexican man who lived in Van Horn answered, "I am Luis, Mrs. Jackson. I have come to help." Pancho Villa's raiders did not come to Van Horn that night. They raided Nogales, Arizona instead.

Mrs. Cummings expresses a certain amount of disbelief as to whether a raid on Nogales actually took place by the Villistas. Off-hand, I don't know of any that took place there. I would like to add that this article was about Mrs. D.B. Jackson. Mrs. Jackson was the mother of the subject of this interview. She remarried in 1908. In order to clarify the first part of the interview, I'd like to read a portion of the article.

Mrs. D.B. Jackson was born in Limestone County, Texas. She was the daughter of Benjamin F. Bird and Sarah Foster Bird. She was a direct descendant of the Birds of Virginia and was related to Harry Flood Bird and Robert Bird, who is presently a member of the U. S. Senate. The Bird homestead, known as Westover, still stands on the James river near Richmond, Virginia. It is a colonial showplace. Mrs. Jackson attended Bell Plains College and Baylor University. She taught school in the hill country of Texas. In 1900 she was married to George Sowell. They moved to Culberson County in the early 1900s. To this marriage were born three children, W.F. Sowell, Henry Sowell and Alice Sowell Cummings. In 1906, George Sowell died. As a young widow Mrs. Jackson built the first hotel in Culberson County on the site where the K-Part Shop and the Empress Beauty Salon now stand.

Mrs. Cummings, what was the prevalent opinion about Pancho Villa?

C: Well, in Van Horn, just his name meant terror, you know. He was a raider, a desperado; and any of the good things that he may have done escaped us entirely, because we didn't think of him as anything, except... And especially after the Columbus Raid, that just was the worst thing that could've happened.

E: Did anybody ever bother to find out Villa's activities--his political and

social activities in Mexico?

C: No, they didn't. They were just afraid that... There were raids along the border. And one night here, that's Ed Nevil right there. You may not need to read it all.

E: Mrs. Cummings has shown me a book called The History of Van Horn in Culberson County, Texas, by Rosalie Wiley, published in Hereford, Texas, in 1973. On page 142 of that book, there is a brief biographical sketch of one Ed Nevil, [whose son] was killed by Mexican marauders during the Mexican Revolution.

Mrs. Cummings, among the many figures of importance who were active along the border was one Pascual Orozco. I understand that you had occasion to see his body after he was killed.

C: Yes, we got word, and I don't remember how, but that there were Mexican officers in the county, in Culberson County south, there. And it's a vast--still is--just wilderness. And so, of great fear, they formed a posse from Van Horn and also Sierra Blanca. And they went out and killed these five officers. Now, there is some word that they were killed by Rangers. Well, there might've been Rangers among them in the posse, but it was a sheriff's posse. And they were all five shot and brought to Van Horn and laid on the lawn of the courthouse. And I saw all five of them with brains out, you know, from their head. A gory scene for a little bitty girl, but we didn't feel like that it was such a terrible thing, to see these monsters killed, you know.

E: Were they actually shot in the head?

C: Yes, they were shot in the head. And I know there was conjecture as to who it might be. They thought, "Well, it isn't Pancho Villa." And so, then they shipped those bodies to El Paso, or away. And the word was, my

father, I heard him say, that it was an officer called Orozco, Pascual Orozco. They were all officers, they had these leather leggings in their uniforms, you know. And you could tell that they were officers. And they had maps of the country. And we don't know what their object was, except that they were killed.

E: Now, you said they were shot in the head. This is an interesting point. Were all of them shot in the head or just a couple or maybe one?

C: Well, the one that was on the end was, that I saw. And I couldn't tell you which one was Orozco. That's the word that...my father was deputy there.

E: This would be your stepfather.

C: Yes, my stepfather. Well, he's the only father I ever knew. So...

E: But legally he was your stepfather.

C: He was legally my stepfather and I always went by the name of Sowell and his name was Jackson. But he was very well respected and we feel like that he was a great man in the way of being a father to us.

E: Do you recall what he said about this incident, this Orozco incident?

C: No. He was a great teller of stories, but when it came time to be quiet, he was very terse, very quiet. For instance, the sheriff was killed in front of the house, and we were at the supper table--you see, this house being this hotel on the main street. And the customers had gone and we were having our dinner. And we heard the shot when we were going to go to see. And he said, "Come back here and sit down." And everybody in town had to be witness to that except us. We didn't see it.

E: A little while ago you used the word "monsters" to describe these people. Is that the way you felt and everybody else felt about these people?

C: Well, that's the word we use today. Then it was Pancho Villa, and you

couldn't say anything worse than that. And anybody that came over was Pancho Villa. And we hoped it was.

E: Later on, did you ever hear anybody talk about that Orozco incident?

C: No, I never did.

E: So you have no knowledge of, say, exactly why they were killed, what the circumstances were and so forth?

C: No, I don't. The only thing is that they were riding in territory where they weren't supposed to be. And I have often asked myself that--what justification they could have for just going and shooting those men. However, they were armed, of course, and nobody ever lived in that part of the country that wasn't armed--if for nothing else, for rattlesnakes. No, I never heard. But I have had this little twinge of conscience about the atomic bomb and the killing of Orozco.

E: Do you have any knowledge of any living person that may have a greater amount of information to give us on the circumstances of Orozco's death?

C: No. My brother could've told you, but he died in January of this year. He [was] quite knowledgeable of all kinds of things and had [a] very clear, good head. But he is not here and I don't know of anybody else. This woman that wrote this graduated in the same class. Now he graduated from high school in Van Horn. And Rosalie Wiley, there were three in the graduating class, and she was one of them. So she is still alive and she wrote this book. Now, she is not an educated person any farther than that high school education, and I thought she did a wonderful job. I know that most of the things in here, I don't agree with them, you know, slightly; but nevertheless, you can't refute those pictures that she has gathered through those years. And it was a wonderful effort, nobody else had ever done it.

E: And where does Mrs. Wiley live?

C: It's Miss Wiley--she's still Miss Wiley--and she lives in Van Horn. And see, this is the hotel that my grandfather built for my mother. And this is D.B. Jackson, and that's my mother. And that's me right there.

E: What year was that picture taken?

C: Well, I guess I was four, five.

E: Do you know Miss Wiley?

C: Yes, quite well.

E: I just might make a trip out to Van Horn to talk to her.

C: All right. I'm sure she is very easy to talk to. [Shows Mr. Estrada another picture.] That's the inside of that hotel and that's my daddy talking on the telephone.

E: Let's see. Did you constantly hear about these border raids Mrs. Cummings?

C: Well, we were in constant fear of them, you know, until, well, I think, Pershing came along and maybe relieved the situation somewhat. I don't know what he did.

E: What was the reaction there in Van Horn when you all found out about the Columbus Raid?

C: Well, this I don't remember. That it was just part of the whole thing, that it was the climax on the atrocities.

E: Mrs. Cummings, you stated that there was the general belief in your family that your real father had been killed because he had set up a homestead in that area.

C: [Yes.]

E: Was the homestead there in Van Horn?

C: No, it was down by the Green River.

E: Green River Canyon?

C: Yes. And that's down south of Marfa.

E: That happens to be where Orozco was actually killed, wasn't it?

C: No, I don't think so.

E: The books say that.

C: It might be in that general...you know that I am not familiar with the terrain down in there. And I must say that for many years, that I just had a vague idea as to where this place was. And I would say in the last few years that...my brother's a surveyor, and he was showing me on a map where it was, this Green River. And it's in south part of [the Big Bend area]. It could be true that [Orozco] was killed there.

E: Well, that's what I read. That's what I read.

C: Yes, it might be so.

E: Let me ask you, who were the larger ranchers in that area at the time? Do you have any recollection?

C: Well, Jim Daugherty--let's see if he could've been.

E: The reason I was asking is that I've had information from some of Pascual Orozco's relatives in Ciudad Chihuahua that Pascual knew at least one prominent rancher in the area, Anglo American rancher, there in the Van Horn area, or maybe south. And I would like to establish the name of this person.

C: Well, do you know it?

E: No, I don't. I don't.

C: Well, I know a great many ranchers.

E: I'm told also that this particular rancher perhaps had sold mules to Pascual Orozco's father. This because Orozco's father was sort of muleteer and a merchant at the same time, coming all the way from western Chihuahua up to

Franklin in the 1880s, what's today El Paso. And that he would buy mules over in that area. You know of any people that specialized in mules and so forth?

C: Mules? No. Everybody had their mules in those days, their work mules. And of course, that's what they were. And horses. But I don't know anybody that specialized in them. It might've been that they gathered them, you know, and sold them that way from different ones. And down in there, I haven't been able to straighten out my mind about the Green River situation and my father, and the ranchers that are in that section. Nevil was down there.

E: Is there any chance that there were still problems of this nature, problems of the nature that apparently cost your father's life, occurring, say, between 1910 and 1920?

C: Not that bad. Because there didn't seem to be any homesteading, they were all pretty well settled by the time that I was aware. And it was bought and fenced and stocked, anything that I knew anything about.

E: So, you would think that your father's situation may have been an isolated incident?

C: This, I must answer in this way--that he was a very energetic person, and he would ride from one end of the county to the other doing various things. And he wanted to get ahead and be a rancher. And he did own quite a bit of cattle; and I don't know that he owned so many. He brought several thousand, 2,000 to be [exact]--not several--2,000 head of cattle to that country. But they were not his, he brought them for a cattle company. But he had horses and cattle of his own. And those early days was very hard on men. You hear about them being hard on women. But he was killed like that, he was killed some way, because he was alive one day and five days later he was

completely gone. And there was another man who, down by the Rio Grande, was lost in the quicksand. And another one fell off of a windmill tower and killed himself that way. And it seemed like that men really had a rough time living, surviving in those days. So, I know that particular kind of thing, I don't know of any other. I just know that my mother always thought so, but the law west of the Pecos was something to...well...

E: Frontier justice.

C: Frontier justice is right. And maybe no justice. There was no looking for anything like that.

E: Now, you've lived here in El Paso since about 1942. Is that right?

C: Yes, that's right.

E: To your mind, what major changes have taken place in the character of this border city?

C: Well, there seem to be a great many more Mexicans than there ever were.

Say, for instance, the school over here where my boys went to school. In the school of seven or eight hundred there would be 25 or 30 Mexicans. And now, then, it's reversed. There would be maybe 25 Anglos there, and the rest are Mexicans. And it's a big school. And I would say the biggest change has been in education.

E: Because of this different ratio of one ethnic group to another?

C: I don't think that's quite...I don't know what brought it on. I am a teacher.

E: Yes.

C: I taught first grade in Alamo School for 30 years, more than 30 years. And Alamo School was nearly all Mexican American.

E: When you arrived there?

C: Yes, and always. And it still is. But there might be one or two different

ones. And then when they changed and integrated the Negroes, there never were very great many of those in that [school], but they came if they wanted to, of course, you know. But there were never more than, I'd say, five or six in the school, and maybe one or two Anglos. Most of them were Mexicans. And the compulsory school law, they began to enforce it. The reason for this is because the state began to pay the schools on the A.D.A., which was Average Daily Attendance. So they really beat the bushes, and then's when the Mexicans began to come to school better than they had before. And they came of all ages. Well, at that time, I taught basics, because that's the only way I could teach.

E: Three R's?

C: The Three R's. And of course, I had a modern view because I was going to school and teaching school, and keeping house about like I do now. (Laughing) But I had three sons. And the thing that I wanted to do was to teach them to think and teach them to want to read, and then other basics. And that was my whole philosophy of teaching. I could teach music and art, which I did, and at first my own P.E.

E: What do you think you fared in teaching these young Mexican kids?

C: Well, I was very satisfied with it, and I loved them very much. And this past Christmas one called me and he said, "I am Fernando Carrillo." He said, "Do you remember me?" And I said, "Yes." Of course, who would say no, for goodness sake. But I didn't remember the name. And he said, "You were the best teacher that I ever had. I am now head of social studies in Los Angeles," or somewhere out there in California. And he played with the Cowboys in Texas. He said he wasn't a great star, but at Simmons, is it, that the Cowboys are?

E: You mean in college?

C: I don't know. When he did go to college, he was one of the...

E: Maybe Hardin Simmons?

C: Yes, I think so. And he said, "Do you remember that you bought me a pair of shoes." And I said, "Yes." I didn't remember this. But then this is no use to say no, because I did buy shoes. That was before free lunches and such as this. He said, "And you paid my supply fee and let me do little jobs and pay it back." And he, boy, he was very profuse in his...

E: Gratitude.

C: Yes. And he said that he would keep in touch with me. Now, that's the best Christmas present that I ever received. And I hope that I do get to see him sometime. I'm sure that if I saw him I would remember him, you know. But there's so many Fernandos, and usually I don't get familiar with the last name.

E: Surely, you must've been able to discern what socio-economic status most of these children came from.

C: Well, yes. They were...some of them were really hungry. But they were always quite clean. This I noted, you know. But if I could see a child who was hungry, that needed food, I would immediately get it, because that was part of...

E: Was there a mechanism for doing this or was it entirely on your own initiative?

C: Well, no, there was not a mechanism at that time. [Lunch cost], what?--25¢ or something like that, you know. And of course, 25¢ was quite a bit.

E: Actually two bits.

C: Yes, two bits. (Laughs) Two bits, and that's what it was. And there was not [a mechanism] at that time. And I would rather it would've been that

way than for my taxes to have grown so, and to feed a whole school.

E: Yes.

C: And they were of low economic condition there.

E: Do you remember, for example, what were the occupations, more or less, of the parents of these children?

C: Well, they worked for Phelps Dodge and they worked for Peyton Packing Company. And some of them, as time went on, they got so that they owned something like say, oh, a laundromat, on a small scale. And some of them worked for White Sands. And they were all jobs, you know. There were not many Mexican teachers at that time. In fact, there were just a few.

E: To what do you attribute that?

C: I don't know. I think that the Mexicans themselves, as they became educated, this having to go, realized that that was a good source of income. As years went on it became better than most jobs. And I think that as they became educated, why, they took over, so to speak. And I know our school, say from one or two Mexicans, was more than half when I quit--teachers.

E: Were most of the teachers in the elementary schools in El Paso at that time Anglo Americans?

C: I know they were at that time when I started teaching there, because there were very few...

E: Not to belabor the point, but would you say that this was due to the lack of education and qualifications on the part of the Mexicans, or was it due, perhaps, to an unspoken systematic discrimination against Mexicans?

C: Well, I never felt this discrimination myself, so I wouldn't say that. I thought that it was the lack of qualification, because as they became qualified they became teachers. And I know some of my very good friends were

Mexican American teachers, you know.

E: Were there ever any stages at which there evolved a certain belligerence on the part of these Mexican American teachers as they became assimilated into the El Paso Public School System?

C: No, I don't.

E: In any demonstrations, any demands, any petitions, anything of that nature?

C: No teachers, not that I know of. I felt quite an animosity from Mr. Calleros, Cleofas Calleros. Oh, I hated to hear him speak. He was very ugly. But I felt sorry for him too, because I felt like he might've been hurt somewhere in his travels and his going about. But he was very...

E: You say animosity. What was the nature of this animosity?

C: Well, he accused the Anglos of discrimination. And he did it to a great extent and he did it in front of Anglo teachers, because they were mostly Anglos.

E: What were the occasions?

C: Well, he was asked to speak, being a historical man. He was asked to speak because he had respect in that respect. So he was asked to speak at the Trans-Pecos Convention of Teachers one time. And he got off on this business of discrimination, and how the schools in Juarez were so much better than the ones over here. That he had been taught, he knew the multiplication tables and everything in the first grade when he was six years old, in Juarez.

E: Because he'd gone to school over there?

C: Yeah. And he said this was not so over here. Well, but he just belittled the whole situation, which was not a good thing for him to do.

E: Did he have a particular support?

C: Well, the Mexicans did like him, you know.

E: For saying those things?

C: I don't know for saying those things, but they liked him, anyway.

E: Now, are your reservations about the man based on those particular statements or on a general appearance, his general personality?

C: Not anything about his general personality. He looked rather, I'd say, Negro more than Mexican to me. But then I, that didn't make any difference either. I haven't any animosity about that situation. It's just when somebody makes statements that are not necessarily true and are combustible.

E: I understand.

C: And I must say I never read anything that he wrote, but I never heard him make a decent talk, because he was always in this frame of mind when I was in the audience. He must've made some better ones, because...

E: The law of averages.

C: Right.

E: Now, you must've talked to some of your fellow teachers about talks of this nature, you know, whenever you heard somebody talk about discrimination and so forth.

C: Yes.

E: What were their reactions?

C: Well, same as mine, of course, you know. But that's who I would talk to, somebody that would agree with me.

E: Who was the first Mexican American elementary teacher that you knew here in El Paso?

C: Well, I guess it was Consuelo Silva.

E: At Alamo?

C: [Yes.]

E: What was her background? Do you have any idea?

C: Well, her father was the county health doctor, Dr. Ornedo. And that was her background. He saw that she was educated and was qualified, and she was the first one that we had down there that I can remember.

E: Do you know where she was educated?

C: Maybe here. I guess here. I don't know for sure. That's just a supposition.

E: You mentioned earlier that at Alamo you could count on maybe one or two or three Anglo Americans attending school--in the whole school?

C: In the whole school.

E: If you can recall, what was the socio-economic background of these kids?

C: Well, just about average. The one that I can think of now was a son of one of the teachers. Then another one was a man who's wife had left him and he left the child down at the one of the day care places for the time that school wasn't in. He brought him down there, and he had, I guess, a good job. Anyway, it was taking care of that boy.

E: How did these kids get along with the majority of the kids?

C: Couldn't tell the difference. Of course, these are little children, you know, and they don't...

E: Did the Mexican American kids speak Spanish mostly on the playground, for example?

C: They were not allowed to at first, you know. They were greatly encouraged to speak English. But then as time went on, of course...

E: Why do you think the break came, the change?

C: Well, when the Federal Government began to give aid, why then they began to say that you would give instructions in Spanish. All right. This is when they could speak Spanish on the school ground or anywhere else that they

wanted to.

E: When did you start teaching here in El Paso?

C: In 1942.

E: In 1942, what was your general philosophy? What was your approach to the question of Mexican American children in El Paso speaking Spanish, say, on the playground? Not in the classroom but on the playground?

C: Well, I was not too hard, as most of us were not. But my philosophy is that they should begin to learn English immediately and to give all instructions, and the teacher will blend her efforts so that they will learn English.

E: Being from Van Horn and San Antonio and Balmorhea and other places, had you picked up any Spanish before you came to El Paso?

C: Well, I don't speak fluent Spanish, but I speak enough that I get along very well.

E: Did you already know a few words before you came to El Paso?

C: Yes, I think so. Yes, I'm sure I did. Yes, I took Spanish, but that doesn't mean anything. And also I taught in the Mexican school in Balmorhea. As I've told you, Anglo teachers taught the schools, and it was all Mexican.

E: Exclusively?

C: Exclusively Mexican. But over there, not that it makes any difference, but the Germans and the Irish had moved in there and intermarried. And they were quite blond, you know.

E: Intermarried among the Mexicans?

C: Yes, or Indians or whatever. But they spoke Spanish.

E: What kind of surnames did these children have?

C: Well, they had like, Liles and Dutchover. Dutchover got their name because the ranchman was trying to talk to this Dutchman, this German. And he says,

"What's your name?" And the man told him what the name was. And he says, "Oh, you're just Dutch all over." And so his name became Dutchover. And of course, then there were a great many that were...

E: Were they given Spanish first names?

C: Let's see...I think they were. Yes, they were. And in the case of them having a Mexican name, when the father was a Mexican, why they would have [an] Anglo name.

E: You mean, like a nickname?

C: Well, yes, I guess so. Because this Fred Vasquez was one. He was quite blonde. And I think he's a teacher or principal here in town somewhere now. But he was in my school. He was a great overage child, maybe 15 in [a lower grade].

E: Now, say, these people living in Balmorhea, did they come from a rural background?

C: Yes.

E: Like ranching, farming and so forth?

C: Yes. That's the whole thing there. It is quite rural.

E: In retrospect, can you detect any particular difference between those kids out there and the young kids out here whom you taught in school?

C: No, I can't. They came having spoken Spanish at home, you know.

E: But were these kids, say, somewhat more streetwise here in El Paso or not?

C: I guess so, yes, you know. Of course, where I taught over there was a community. And they just...you wouldn't call it the street, because they just all lived everywhere.

E: Did you ever detect any preponderance of street lingo or "caló" as it's known down here among the Mexican kids here in El Paso?

C: Well, this was my objection to giving them instruction in Spanish. These children came with their border accent, you know, or their border talk, and they taught them in good Spanish. And then they had the English to contend with, too. So, I thought it just added to confusion instead of... Now, that's my opinion, and I'm very unpopular in that opinion, so...

E: I think I hold a similar opinion. Let's see. You mentioned the example of this man whom you hadn't seen in many years, that you taught first grade to, coming back and giving you a phone call and so forth, many, many years later. Now, did you ever have any knowledge of kids after they left your classroom? I mean, did you find out that so-and-so became a meat packer or so-and-so became a policeman or so forth? Did you ever keep tabs?

C: No, I didn't. I do know that some of them did and also some of them fell by the way. I see their name in the dope column, you know, when... They went every which way. A good many of 'em became teachers, you know, that because that became the thing to do.

E: Of course, hindsight's a wonderful thing, but these people that fell by the wayside, let's say, did become dope addicts or whatever. In retrospect, can you detect any reason why they did? Was there anything about them, were they any less attentive, did they come from broken homes or anything like that?

C: I couldn't tell that they did. In the first place, the first one that I knew about, he was not very bright, you know. He was a slow learner. And then another one, he seemed to be very bright, except he didn't learn to read. But then another little girl that just died from dope, when she became a young woman, was very smart and very...just all right, you know. But she was very fair, she must've been...[as a] matter of fact, she has an Anglo name. But she spoke Spanish and so her mother was Spanish, I know; her

mother was Mexican. And her name was Sampson. And she just...I don't know, I think she just thought it was fun. I can't figure...I saw her on the street one day and high as a kite, just skipping down. And she didn't of course, even, know me. She had two compadres and they were just skipping and dancing down there.

E: But you recognized her?

C: Oh, yes. So many times, you know, you will recognize them, and on the other hand there will be those that you don't remember. I might remember their face, but not to put a name to them.

E: You mentioned that you thought that the outstanding change in the character of El Paso since you first got here is the increase in the number of persons of Mexican descent, particularly in the schools of El Paso. What schools did your children go to?

C: They went to Rusk and to Austin. And Austin is the same way--that there were very few Mexicans in that school, and now, then, there are very few Anglos. And then two of them graduated from UTEP, and the other one is still going to school, but he's just taking one subject at a time. He's studying in Los Angeles. And he's perhaps old enough to be your father! (Laughs) And he's studying smog and air pollution.

E: What were your views, as a mother--not as a teacher--about having your children either associate or socialize with Mexican Americans?

C: I had no prejudice in that respect. My oldest son, the one I guess I spoke to you about, is, his best friend was...we called him Buddy Rivera. And I remember that one time my son was invited to a party and he came home and told me that he was not going. They hadn't invited Buddy, and anywhere they didn't invite Buddy he was not going. And my second son worked out here for

Portland Cement. He was chief chemist and manager in Odessa. And he had a very good friend named Martinez that was also a chemist. And so, I don't know, he would be the one that would be a bigot, but not really. He's just a big blow. Do you ever see O'Connor there in All in the Family?

E: Yes.

C: All, right. That's my second son, exactly. (Laughs)

E: But as far as your views, do you recall ever having any aversion in your own mind as to, for example, your boys going out with a Mexican girl?

C: No. They never did. No, this middle one did. He had, I think, a couple of girls that he went out with. One was named Duarte. Then my older son did know Mary Ellen Acevedo. And there was no objection to anything. As I say, Buddy Rivera, I think he has become a doctor now, Dr. Rivera, and he has worked with White Sands and maybe in connection with UTEP.

E: What was the prevalent view which your friends held on that subject?

C: I guess that my friends were the same as I am. We had this little thing that, you know, that the characteristic of the Mexican American is [that] if they can do something that will get your goat, they're liable to do it--to themselves or to anybody else. And we have been known to say, "Now, that's a Mexican trick." You know. (Laughs) But there was no animosity.

E: In other words, you think that Mexicans might have the characteristic of being somewhat less stimulated or less inclined to do something?

C: I didn't ever feel that way of course, you know. I had some very smart young ones in my classes. And really, when it comes right down to it, I didn't have any feeling but just good about them.

E: But what I mean is, you used the term, "That's a Mexican trick." Specifically, what are you referring to?

C: Well, say, for instance, I was on a bus one day and the man was a Mexican driver. And I rang the bell, and I guess I was a little slow in getting up to go to the door. I was the last one there, anyway. And he shut the door, you know.

E: Is that right.

C: Yes. And so I got off at the next one. And I reported him. And my husband, you know, worked for the city lines. And the thing that [the driver] said to my husband [was], "[I] didn't know that that was your wife," and said, "She just didn't go to the door." He knew he did it, you know. (Laughs)

E: In other words, he was sort of trying to get back in some way?

C: I thought that it was a little ornery trick, because I was up and going to the door, you know, and he could see that I was.

E: But you think there's a pattern to this? In other words, do you think that Mexicans in El Paso, whatever number--maybe a significant number--tend to carry a chip on their shoulder?

C: Well, I don't feel that way. It may be that they do. You read and you hear and you see things. But not actually. I mean, you see it in the paper.

E: Mrs. Cummings, you mentioned that your late husband worked for the city lines for many years. Would you repeat in what capacity he worked?

C: He was a supervisor of and an instructor of drivers.

E: Were most of his drivers of Mexican descent?

C: No, they weren't, but there were several.

E: Did he ever have any comments to make about their proficiency in that job as opposed to the Anglo drivers, or Black drivers, or whatever?

C: No. And as far as I know, they've never had any Black drivers.

E: Was there much union activity?

C: Yes, they became unionized after he was in there, I believe.

E: While he was still in there?

C: Yes. During the first few years that he was in there they became union.

But he was not of the union in being a supervisory [person] there. He drove a bus, or the streetcar, which he loved to do when he first came. And they even had a strike, and he was on strike after this union first started in there. But when he became a supervisor, you see, he wasn't in the union anymore.

E: What was the strike about?

C: I don't know. Wages, I suppose. (Laughs) I never know what wages are about. I don't think they know.

E: Over the years, how did he like that particular job? What was there about it that he didn't like?

C: I can't think of anything, because he really did like it. And he hated that he had to give it up.

E: Did he meet a lot of people in that job?

C: Oh, yes. He met the public very well. As I say, he went into Schwartz there and told him, he says, "I can sell anything." And the man said, "I believe that you could." And so he met the public and liked people, you know.

E: You seem to have led a very happy existence here in El Paso. Would that be a fair statement?

C: Yes, I've been happy here. In fact, I think I wouldn't be so happy anywhere else.

E: Well, I'll tell you, we've had a very desultory conversation. We've jumped from...

C: One thing to another.

- E: Pascual Orozco to homesteaders to the Birds of Virginia to the El Paso Public Schools. And I think that even though there are a few more questions I'd like to ask you, I have probably overstayed my welcome here.
- C: I'm so glad to have you. Would you have some coffee?
- E: Well, I just might. But on behalf of the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso, I'd like to thank you once again.
- C: Well, I'm so glad that you came, that you thought it would be worthwhile.